COVID-19 restrictions on Open and Distance learning mode of Higher Education: A study of Lakhimpur Commerce Study Centre

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly one of the biggest and most important crisis in the history of humanity, negatively affecting all sectors, especially education system of India as well as the globe and resulted in mandatory implement of online distance learning. The present study shows 1002 enrolled students of Indira Gandhi National Open University study centre from the year 2020 to 2022 at Lakhimpur Commerce College have been pursuing various under graduate and post-graduate programmes and faced acute challenges in continuation of their higher studies during the Covid-19 restrictions. The present study reveals that the year 2022 has the highest enrollment record than the previous admission years. There were 15.4% and 12.8% enrollments in the years 2022 and 2021, which increased to 35.2% in 2022. Whereas good proportion of male and female students also enrolled in various ODL programmes. The learners faced many challenges during the lockdown such as lack of computer literacy, poor network services, problems in assignment preparation, not receiving hard copies of study materials etc. However, LSC (Learner Support Centre) helped students pursuing different UG and PG programmes. According to the present study many students suffered from different physical health and mental issues during the pandemic. This study highlights the need of technology in ODL mode of higher education. On the other hand, majority of the learners expressed their preferences for face to face learning than online learning through ODL mode of higher education.

Keywords:

Covid-19, Higher Education, Open and Distance learning, Lockdown Restrictions.

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INTRODUCTION

The present world comprises of the developed and developing countries where education plays a vital role in transforming a society to enable their nation to achieve its goal of overall development and growth. Higher education is recognized as a vehicle for sustainable development and is realized as a powerful tool to build knowledge based society. Higher education creates professionals, thinkers, future teachers, researchers, economists and knowledge workers, who, besides inhabiting knowledge societies, can be instrumental in creating them. Higher education in the country is available to the top 30% of our population only. The conventional system of education has undoubtedly contributed significantly both to the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, yet the fact remains that the conventional system has neither been able to solve the problem of access, nor of equity and equality. The education through distance and open system is an alternative mode of imparting instruction, which has helped to meet the demands for education of millions of people at different level.

Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly one of the biggest and most important crisis in the history of humanity, negatively affecting all sectors, especially education with this crisis, which was felt deeply by all people and institutions in the public and private sector, all societies had to force a new normal life order that must be lived with the pandemic, which has become a real danger to all humanity, showing how vulnerable human life is. Humanity relies on the prevention capacity of information against possible risks and preparing scenario for crisis, has a hard time coping with this, and was caught unprepared. Although the pandemic caused an additional obstacle to the lives of people struggling with poverty and hunger, it has made trust, social welfare, individual freedom, and social relations more fragile and more manipulated for people.

On the other hand, Covid-19 has severely affected the total educational system of India as well as the globe and resulted in mandatory implement of online distance learning across almost every level and type of educational institution. It paved the way to initiate digital learning as an emergency alternative education system at all levels of education. However, at the starting of the Covid-19 outbreak sudden closure of HEIs (Higher Educational Institutions) tends to increase pressure on students, teachers and parents. It could increase student debt, prolong to graduation or post-graduation time, and shatter the academic-calendar and academic dreams of the students.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A less number of studies have been conducted in the field of covid-19 restrictions on Distance and Open Learning (ODL) mode of higher education. Although during the pandemic all regular educational systems shifted to online distance mode learning. Hardly a few studies have been found and from these studies it has been observed that covid-19 restrictions on distance mode of higher education will bring out the problems faced by students during the pandemic. Thus the present study is an attempt to evaluate learning stamina and mental fitness of the learners at the Lakhimpur Commerce College study centre. The present study will have immense importance for educational planners and policymakers. The present study will also be helpful to the governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental agencies in formulation of policies and strategies.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1) To study enrollment status of learners in higher education under Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system under the study area.

2) To study the progress and performance of ODL system during Covid-19 lockdown in higher education under the study area.

3) To study the different constraints faced by the learners by adopting ODL system under the study area.

4) To study technological supports availed by the learners under the ODL system during the Covid-19 restrictions under the study area.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present study is conducted in Lakhimpur Commerce College study centre of Distance and Open Learning (ODL) under Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) among the enrolled students from the year 2020 to 2022 to find personal aspects of ODL students like purpose of the joining ODL programmes, problems faced during the lockdown, online platforms for counselling, academic supports from the study centre, physical health and mental health issues, benefits of technologies in education during Covid-19, restrictions of Covid-19 in studies, whether Covid-19 makes higher education through ODL mode more popular and convenient for students and response of students in favour of online and face-to-face learning.

The present study will be based on the following methodology:

Profile of the Study Area:

The study centre is located in Lakhimpur district of Assam situated on the North-East corner of upper Assam. Out of geographical area of 2277 sq. km., 2257 sq. km. covering the rural area and only 20 sq. km. covering the town area of the district. The total population of the district is 10, 42,137 as per census 2011. The district has two sub-divisions namely North Lakhimpur and Dhakuakhana sub-division. North Lakhimpur sub-division consists of 7 development blocks namely Narayanpur, Bihpuria, Karunabari, Nowboicha, Telahi, Lakhimpur and Boginadi. On the other hand, Dhakuakhana sub-division consists of 2 development blocks namely Ghilamora and Dhakuakhana.

Sampling Design and Techniques:

For the purpose of the study Lakhimpur Commerce College will be selected as the college has been imparting distance and open learning education through IGNOU, KKHSOU and DDE under Dibrugarh University. More than 1000 learners have enrolled under this system of learning at the study centre.

Sources and Collection of Data:

For the purpose of the study both the primary and secondary data will be used. The primary data will be collected through field survey with field in questionnaire served to the learners. The primary data will also be supplemented by the data collected from secondary sources like college and other websites. The secondary data will be collected through various books, journals, magazines, relevant documents, brochures, reports, newspapers and internet.

Tools and Techniques for Analysis:

Simple mathematical tools like percentage, average etc. will be used for processing and analysis the data. If subject demand, also there will be use of some descriptive statistical tools like correlation and similar other statistical tools to make fulfilment of the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The present paper shows that the study centre (0413) at Lakhimpur Commerce College i.e. affiliated to Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi falls under Jorhat Regional Centre (Code-3700) has a good number of enrolled students i.e. 1002 from the year 2020 to 2022. Table 1 shows out of 1002 enrolled students from the year 2020 to 2022 only 90 samples i.e. 9.0% of enrolled ODL student-volunteers from the study centre are randomly selected for the purpose of this study as respondents.

Table 2 shows year wise enrollment records of ODL students of the study centre from the year 2018 to 2022 under the study area. It has been observed that number of

students enrolled in the year 2018 January cycle was only 74 which increased to 210 in the same year in July cycle. In the year 2019, 296 enrollments were there including both the cycles that too show increases in ODL admission. In the years of Covid-19 pandemic i.e. 2020 and 2021 enrollment of students went down in comparison to previous years. But the enrollment record of 2022 is surprising because a sharp rise in enrollments (i.e. 557 students) has broken previous records. The comparative data analysis from the year 2018 to 2022 in Table 2 shows that in the year 2018, there was an 18% enrollment where it increased to 0.7% in 2019. While during the Covid-19 pandemic in the years 2020 and 2021 had 15.4% and 12.8% enrollments. On the other hand, year 2022 had huge enrollments i.e. 35.2% in comparison to the previous years that show popularity of ODL mode of higher education among the students. The year 2021 had the lowest enrollment rate i.e. 12.8%.

The available data in Table 3 shows numbers of male and female students enrolled in January and July cycles from the year 2018 to 2022 under the study area. It has revealed that in the year 2018 (July cycle) 120 (54.7%) male and 90 (42.9%) female students were enrolled that was increased to 128 (54.7%) males and 106 (45.3%) females in 2019 July cycle. On the other hand, in the year 2022 (July) the data reveals a sharp increase in ODL mode admissions under the study area i.e. 180 (48.3%) males and 193 (51.7%) females in total 373 students in comparison to previous years' enrollment records after Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis has revealed the popularity of ODL mode of higher education among male and female students under the study area.

Available data in Table 4 shows that majority of the respondents i.e. 47.7% have mentioned their interest for joining the ODL programmes for job purpose and promotion. 24.5% respondents join to get education while staying at home. 4.4% join the ODL mode for standard programmes on different courses. 8.8% respondents join the ODL programmes because they get opportunity to study while in service. 11.2% respondents opted for ODL programmes to fulfil educational expectations to enrich knowledge in various subject areas and 3.4% respondents join ODL programmes

because it is easy to complete the programme within course duration.

Table 5 highlights that 22.2% each of the respondents were unable to purchase required technical gadgets during the lockdown while 17.8% respondents were unfamiliar with digital platforms and their usage. Also 11.1% respondents agreed that they faced problems to operate smart phones and other digital devices. On the other hand, 17.8% respondents complained about poor network services in their locations. 8.9% respondents expressed their problems in assignment preparation due to unavailability of e-resources. 16.7% respondents said- they didn't get hard copies of study materials; and only 5.6% respondents were not able to purchase high speed internet services.

Table 6 shows that majority of the respondents i.e. 84.4% got their online counselling in Google Meet online platform, while 11.1% through Zoom online platform. No respondents got counselling through Skype, Facebook live or WhatsApp. Only 4.5% respondents were attended the live counselling through YouTube live.

Another effort has been made by the researcher to know about the academic supports provided by LSC (Learner Support Centre) to the respondents during the Covid-19 pandemic. The present study reveals that 41.1% respondents got online submission facility of assignments. 27.8% respondents were opined that LSC helped them by sharing data for their project work. 12.2% respondents benefited by the e-resources provided by LSC. 11.1% respondents opined that LSC provided them motivational sessions on general topics in the form of webinar. And only 7.8% respondents got online counselling during Covid-19 pandemic (Table 7).

Analysis of the study in Table 8 shows that respondents suffer from different physical health and mental issues during Covid-19 lockdown under the study area. The study reveals that the majority of 17.8% of respondents suffered from sadness and depression. 14.4% eyes problems due to long online counselling sessions, 13.3% over thinking, 12.2% lost interest in studies, 10.0% worried about personal safety, 10.0% back pain, 8.9% loneliness and emptiness, 6.7% headache and body pain and 4.4% worried

for their future. Only 2.2% respondents expressed that they suffered from distractions.

An effort has also been made by the researcher to know the different technological benefits that the respondents got in their studies during Covid-19 pandemic. 22.2% respondents said that technology has made virtual communications easy. 20% respondents felt technology was helpful in information sharing during their studies while 18.9% respondents agreed that technology has opened door for online learning. 16.7% of the respondents said that technology has made online admission facility available. On the other hand, it is observed 8.9% respondents expressed that technology is helpful to get open e-resources for assignments and project works, and 7.8% of the respondents felt it is easy to enroll in online learning programmes because of technology. Only 5.6% respondents expressed their views that technology has made education possible during Covid-19 pandemic (Table 9).

It is observed that respondents under the study area expressed their views on the Covid-19 restrictions on ODL mode of higher education during and after Covid-19 lockdown. The Table 10 shows 97.8% respondents missed face to face counselling classes during the pandemic, 97.7% respondents missed face to face induction meetings due to Covid-19 restrictions, 91.1% respondents said they faced communication gap between student and teacher and 90% respondents missed offline admission counselling. On the other hand, 92.2% respondents expressed the difficulties they faced in course based learning, 73.3% respondents were suffer from poor network and server related problems, while 67.8% respondents were disappointed for not receiving hard copies of study materials. And only 44.4% respondents under the study area face difficulties in assignment preparation.

An effort has been made by the researcher to know the respondents' views on the popularity of ODL mode of higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic under the study area. The Table 11 shows that the majority of 80% respondents said the ODL mode of higher education become popular among students of different age groups during the Covid-19 pandemic and only 20% respondents said to 'No'.

It is revealed from the Table 12 that 96.7% each of the respondents supported face to face learning and 51.1% respondents were in favour of online learning through ODL mode of higher education under the study area.

Table 1: Number of respondents in the study centre

Sl. No	Name of the Study Centre	Total Enrolled Students	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
01	Lakhimpur Commerce College (IGNOU, Study Centre Code-0413)	1002	90	9.0%

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 2: Year wise enrollment records of the study centre

Sl. No	Year	Admission Cycle	Total No. Of Enrollments (Single Cycle)	Total No. Of Enrollments (Both Cycles)	Percentage (%)
01	2018	January	74	284	18.0
02	2018	July	210		
03	2019	January	62	296	18.7
04	2019	July	234		
05	2020	January	61	243	15.4
06	2020	July	182		
07	2021	January	130	202	12.8
08	2021	July	72		
09	2022	January	184	557	35.2
10	2022	July	373		
	Total		*1582*	*1582*	*100.0*

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 3: Gender wise classification of enrolled students

Sl. No	Year	Admission Cycle	Male	Female	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total
01	2018	January	40	34	54.1	45.9	74
02	2018	July	120	90	57.1	42.9	210
03	2019	January	29	33	46.8	53.2	62
04	2019	July	128	106	54.7	45.3	234
05	2020	January	29	32	47.5	52.5	61
06	2020	July	87	95	47.8	52.2	182
07	2021	January	73	57	56.2	43.8	130
08	2021	July	40	32	55.6	44.4	72
09	2022	January	86	98	46.8	53.2	184
10	2022	July	180	193	48.3	51.7	373
Total			812	770	-	-	1582

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 4: Purpose of joining ODL programmes

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Offers the opportunity of education while staying at home	22	24.5
2	Offers standard programmes on different courses	4	4.4
3	Degrees are equivalent as regular degrees for job purpose and promotion	43	47.7
4	Provides opportunity to study while in service	8	8.8
5	Fulfil educational expectations to enrich knowledge in various subject areas	10	11.2
6	Easy to complete the programme within course duration	3	3.4
	Total	90	100.0

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 5: Problems faced during Covid-19 lockdown

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	To operate smart phone/digital devices	10	11.1
2	Unfamiliar with digital platform and their use	16	17.8
3	Unable to purchase required technical gadgets	20	22.2
4	Unable to purchase high speed internet services	5	5.6
5	Poor network in my area/location	16	17.8
6	Unavailability of e-resources for assignment preparation	8	8.9
7	Unavailability of hard copies of study materials	15	16.7
	Total	*90*	*100.0*

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 6: Online platforms used for counselling during Covid-19

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Zoom	10	11.1
2	Google Meet	76	84.4
3	Skype	NIL	---
4	Facebook live	NIL	---
5	YouTube live	4	4.5
6	WhatsApp	NIL	---
	Total	*90*	*100.0*

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 7: Academic supports provided by LSC during Covid-19 pandemic

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Online counselling	7	7.8
2	e-resources	11	12.2
3	Data sharing for project work	25	27.8
4	Online submission of assignments	37	41.1
5	Motivational sessions on general topics in the form of webinar	10	11.1
	Total	*90*	*100.0*

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 8: Physical health and mental issues faced during the lockdown

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Worry about my personal safety	9	10.0
2	Distracted easily	2	2.2
3	Over thinking	12	13.3
4	Feel sad and depressed	16	17.8
5	Loss interest in studies	11	12.2
6	Feel lonely and emptiness	8	8.9
7	Suffer from headache and body pain	6	6.7
8	Suffer from eyes problem due to long online classes	13	14.4
9	Suffer from back pain	9	10.0
10	Uncertain about my future	4	4.4
	Total	*90*	*100.0*

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 9: Benefits of technologies during covid-19 pandemic

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Make education possible	5	5.6
2	Open door for online learning	17	18.9
3	Online admission facility available	15	16.7
4	Helpful in information sharing	18	20.0
5	Open e-resources available	8	8.9
6	Easy to enroll in online learning programmes	7	7.8
7	Virtual communications become easy	20	22.2
	Total	*90*	*100.0*

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 10: Covid-19 restrictions on ODL mode of higher education (Multiple responses)

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Communication gap between student and teacher	82	91.1
2	Difficulties in course based learning	83	92.2
3	Missing admission counselling	81	90.0
4	Missing hard-copies of study materials	61	67.8
5	Missing face-to-face induction meetings	87	96.7
6	Missing face-to-face counselling classes	88	97.8
7	Difficulty in assignment preparation	40	44.4
8	Poor network/weak server (server down)	66	73.3

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 11: Respondents' views on popularity of ODL mode of higher education during Covid-19 pandemic (Multiple responses)

Sl. No	Variables	Respondents' Views	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
01	Do you think Covid-19 makes higher education through ODL mode more popular and convenient for students?	YES	72	80.0
		NO	18	20.0
	Total		90	100.0

Source: Compiled from field survey

Table 12: Respondents' views on support of online and face to face learning (Multiple responses)

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
01	Online Learning	45	51.1
02	Face to Face Learning	87	96.7

Source: Compiled from field survey

CONCLUSION

Education is a key part of strategies to improve individual as well as societies' economic and social development. On the other hand, Covid-19 pandemic has brought a huge transformation in the world education system of 21st Century. The study centre under the study area or any study centre providing ODL mode of higher education must go with full-fledged manner by adopting technology driven solutions in all activities. Such as teaching-learning, research, assessment and evaluation, administration, admissions, learner supports, academic counselling; quality enhancement etc. Academic counselling can be organised online mode using various digital platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, SWAYAM etc. For the uninterrupted functioning of the learners learning, the education system must adopt digitalisation to convert the educational challenges to opportunities. Covid-19 like situation is just like a beginning. Now it depends upon people how they deal with it at present and in future. Awareness, civic sense and social values are some of the important factors that can challenge and dominate Covid-19 pandemic now and then. Apart from this, the study centres must maintain at least minimum physical communication with the enrolled students to know their problems and to offer solutions to their problems; also the authorities concerned should work together to make ODL mode of higher education accessible to all to increase quality and skillful manpower to build a strong and healthy nation.

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