

Anjana *Editor*

Technology for Efficient Learner Support Services in Distance Education

Experiences from Developing Countries

 Springer

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Dedicated to my parents

Preface

One of the main challenges for open and distance learning providers is to ensure an effective learner support system to help learners make the paradigm shift from traditional teacher-centred delivery mode to mediated distance learning. It is important for the distance educators to take into consideration the expectations of the learners in ODL systems in order to cater to the needs, aspirations and individual differences of the target groups. With the global advancements in information and communication technology in open and distance learning system, the scope for providing effective learner support services to the learners around the world has increased to a great extent and the technology is being used by the open universities in many ways.

This book aims at understanding the ways in which technology is being used by the open universities of the developing countries in extending learner support services to the distance learners. The main emphasis of the book is to share the best practices that are being followed by different open universities so that the same may be replicated by other universities for extending better support services to their learners.

Chapter “[Open and Distance Education System and Learner Support Services: An Introduction](#)” by Dr. Santosh Kumari presents an introductory account of the open and distance education system and the important role of learner support services in this system. This chapter traces the evolution of open and distance education at the global level over a period of time and makes a comparative assessment of the advancements made in this field by the developed world and the developing countries. Further, the role of information and communication technology in the evolution of distance education has been discussed. Chapter “[Tools of ICT in Open and Distance Learning for Inclusive Education in Developing World](#)” by Dr. Manminder Kaur contains a comprehensive picture of major technologies used in open and distance learning and their benefits for students with diverse educational needs and how these tools of information and communication technology can be used in inclusion. Chapter “[Helping the Distance Education Learners in Getting Effective and Efficient Delivery of Learner Support Services in Developing Countries Through Use of Technology](#)” by Prof. Rajendra Vinayak

Vadnere discusses various issues in implementing the technology in an appropriate manner so that the decision-makers do not blindly follow the technology bandwagon but assess the situations at their locations and take wise decisions. Various innovative technological interventions have been discussed with a view to the scenario of appropriateness in the context of its application. Chapter “[Need for Integration of ICT for Extending Learner Support Services to the Distance Learners in ODL System in Developing World](#)” by Dr. H. U. W. Ratnayake presents various initiatives taken up by the Open University of Sri Lanka in order to extend learner support services to distance learners by integrating ICT into courses it offers. It focuses upon the need for integration of ICT for extending learner support services to the distance learners in ODL system in the developing world.

Chapter “[E-Learning as a Medium for Facilitating Learners’ Support Services Under Open and Distance Learning: An Evaluative Study](#)” by Dr. Trisha Dowerah Baruah presents an evaluative study on the usage of e-learning as a medium for facilitating learners’ support services under open and distance learning by Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University. Chapter “[Use of Technology for Learner Support Services: A Case Study of IGNOU](#)” by Dr. V. Venkata Subrahmanyam highlights the contribution of Indira Gandhi National Open University to higher education in the country, effective use of technology for internal processes, digital initiatives in providing learner’s support, challenges faced in implementation of technology and best practices being followed by the university. Chapter “[Technology-Mediated Learning Support Services at Wawasan Open University, Malaysia](#)” by Dr. Ramesh Chander Sharma discusses the applications of ICT as adopted at Wawasan Open University, Malaysia, for designing and developing learning resources, instructional delivery, feedback, assessment, quality assurance and training.

Chapter “[Technology Affordances at the Open University of Mauritius](#)” by Perienen Appavoo and associates provides a discourse of the different technological tools implemented at the Open University of Mauritius, the benefits that they bring to the learning environment and the frequent challenges that have to be dealt with. Chapter “[Use of Technology at the Open University of Cyprus \(OUC\) to Support Adult Distance Learners: To What Extent Is Being Informed by the Learner-Centred Education \(LCE\) Paradigm?](#)” by Dr. Maria N. Gravani discusses the extent to which technology is used at the Open University of Cyprus to support adult teaching and learning and promote learner autonomy. Chapter “[Information and Communication Technologies \(ICTs\)-Based Learner Support in Distance Education in Pakistan](#)” by Dr. Irshad Hussain presents the usage of modern information and communication technologies for instructional as well as learners’ support services by Allama Iqbal Open University. Chapter “[Role of Technology in Dissemination of Science Education](#)” by Dr. Anuradha Dubey emphasizes the role of technology in the dissemination of science education, extending academic and non-academic support to the learners and the best technological practices followed by Vardhman Mahaveer Open University. Chapter “[An Introspection of the Responses of the Ruralites and the Elderly to Information and Communication Technology in Open Distance Learning](#)” by Dr. Kajal De and Dr. Sampurna Goswami discusses the use

of ICT in open and distance learning in India and inquires into the rate of success of ICT-enabled learner's support system and to what extent the elderly and the rural students are able to gain from such arrangements with reference to Netaji Subhas Open University. Chapter "[Tackling Challenges for Higher Education: Learner Support Services for Distance Learning for Sustainable Collaborative Learning Communities](#)" by Suma Parahakaran presets a model that can help distance learning in a sustainable way by helping the learners to sustain their education without dropping out and at the same time gain skills for employment.

The concluding Chapter "[ICT for Learner Support Services in ODL System in Developing Countries: Challenges and the Road Ahead](#)" by Dr. Moumita Das and Prof. Prabir Kumar Biswas discusses the current use of ICT in higher education in the developing countries and the advantages of the ICT tools and also explores the learner readiness in these countries to use ICT for learning purposes. It touches upon several challenges being faced by the developing countries in terms of infrastructure, skills, resources and policies for extending learner support services. It also attempts to provide suggestions to help improve the quality of the learner support services through policies, infrastructure, planning and innovation.

I express my deep sense of gratitude to all the contributors for taking their valuable time for writing the chapters. I would also like to acknowledge the support that I have received from Ms. Suvira Srivastava and her associates for execution of this project.

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Dr. Anjana is currently working as Assistant Regional Director at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Regional Centre, Noida. Her research interests include application of information and communication technology for efficient delivery of learner support services in open and distance learning system, massive open online courses and technology-enabled learning. She has a number of research papers, review articles and chapters to her credit and has participated in various national and international conferences, symposia and webinars.

Open and Distance Education System and Learner Support Services: An Introduction



Santosh Kumari

Introduction

Open and distance learning system has shown a tremendous growth during the last few decades. It is, however, observed that the demand of this ODL is increasing due to various reasons; for example, it is due to the associated potentials for new innovations and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in providing the learner support services to the distant learners. It is felt that for the success of any distance education programme, the learner support system is very important. It is recognized as an integral and important component in distance education. It is therefore imperative that while providing distance education to the learners, it is to be ensured that good quality of learning support should be provided to them. It is, therefore, imperative for facilitation of interaction and communication between students and academic staff in distance education that more emphasis has to be given for the provision of education support to the learners. (Kember and Dekkers 1987a, b; Sewart 1992a, b; Hillman et al. 1994a, b).

At the global level, the system of distance education has gained its popularity due to various reasons, stated below:

There are many advantages of distance education which have been stated as below (Kaya 2002):

- Provision of various education options.
- Facilitation of mass education.
- Provision of information from the first source.
- Responsibility is provided to the individuals for their learning.
- Facilitate the individuals for an independent learning.

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- The students are provided an environment where maximum learning is possible.
- Provision of cost-effective education.
- Raising a standard in education programme.
- Minimizing the inequality of opportunity.

Keeping into view, all the advantages of distance education, first of all we have to be familiar ourselves with the history of distance education system.

Distance Education and its History at the Global Level

Distance education is a structured learning in which the teacher and the taught are separated by time and place. Nowadays, distance education system is the fastest growing form of domestic and international education. Now, this system is becoming one of the integral parts of mainstream of education. Earlier, it was considered a unique form of education using non-traditional delivery systems.

The Emergence of Distance Education System at the Initial Stage

The concept of distance education has emerged in very early years. It was in the late 1800s, the first pioneer correspondence programme in the USA was established at the University of Chicago, in which the student and the teacher were at different locations. Even before this time, specifically in pre-industrial Europe, the accessibility to higher education was available to males only and this category of male population belongs to the higher strata of society. During those days, the most effective form of providing education to the students was that all the learners are asked to get together at one place and at one time where the instructions were used to be provided by one of the masters. Even today, that traditional form of providing education is still going on. When in 1890, the educators like William Rainey Harper made their efforts to try to bring alternatives to this method, and the people during those days did not like it. Correspondence study which was designed to provide education opportunities, to those learners who do not belong to the highest strata of living or those who do not belong to rich class of society and this type of education was provided to those people who could not afford full-time residence at an educational institution, and this kind of education was considered as inferior type of education. Even, many of the educators considered correspondence courses as simply used for monetary benefits only. The people belonging to the elitist category were offended by the correspondence system of education, and this system was considered by them as extremely undemocratic system of education (Pittman 1991). However, it is always the part of our democratic ideals that equal opportunities of education are to be provided to all. In this way, correspondence education system took a new turn.

With the development of radio during the First World War and later on with the use of television in the 1950s, the traditional classroom instruction through which the education was provided to the learners, they had found suddenly a new delivery system of instructions in the classroom. However, there are many precepts, whereby in the schools the distance education instructions were provided at a distance to the learners by making the use of radio and television.

In the 1920s, it was the early effort of Wisconsin's School of the Air where it was thought that the boundaries of the school were the boundaries of the state. Even the use of audio and computer teleconferencing has influenced the delivery of educational instructions in public schools, higher education, the military, business and industry. Even, with the establishment of the Open University in England in 1969 and Charles Wedemeyer's innovative uses of media in 1986 at the University of Wisconsin, new technology was began to use the system of correspondence studies. In this way, by using this technology distance education was begun to be provided to the learners more effectively.

While tracing the history of distance education, we can notice that there was a development during the second part of the nineteenth century from the first singular attempts in antiquity to the unexpected and astonishing spread of this form of teaching and learning all over the world. During the last 25 years, this development has become quite dramatic with the coming of Open Universities, and at present, it is taking place with very fast speed with the establishment of virtual universities. If we visualize the future, we might predict that this development will continue in future also. It will be strengthened further. Ultimately, it will be expanded more and more in the long run and become an integral part of all higher education in most of the universities all over the world. Especially, in developing countries, its relative cost-effectiveness alone will be critical in this process. The first experiments in distance education were singular and isolated ones. However, it was felt that they were very important for those persons involved because the subject matter was religion and religious controversy, and during that time, it was taken very seriously. It can be referred here to the Apostle Paul for the purpose of teaching Christian communities in Asia, Minor. Whereby, he wants to teach them how to lead a life as Christians, in an adverse environment, he wrote his famous epistles. For the purpose of doing his missionary work without being compelled to travel, he made use of technology of writing and transportation. Vividly, this was, we can say, already a substitution of face-to-face teaching and preaching by mediated and asynchronous teaching and preaching. It was a pre-industrial approach, which was totally a technology-based. All over the world, in the twentieth century, during that time, nobody could think or imagine the outstanding importance which was attached to this very approach. Even, we can say, it seems even more so in the twenty-first century. In the middle of the nineteenth century, correspondence education the first general approach to distance education can be identified; wherever, industrialization had transformed the technological, vocational and social conditions of life.

Shifting from Correspondence Study to Distance Education

International Council for Correspondence Education changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education in the year 1982 for reflecting the developments in the field. With the passage of time and due to technological advancement, there is an evolution of systems for delivering information to its population. The main focus of distance education is to provide equality of access of education. Due to this, today, there are distance education courses which are being offered by a number of public and private organizations and institutions as well as schools, colleges, universities, the military and a large number of corporations.

Desmond Keegan (Keegan 1980) has identified various prospects and promises of distance education which have been given below.

- There is always a distance between the teacher and the learner.
- There is an influence of an educational organization.
- Electronic media is used for linking teacher and the student.
- For establishing a relationship between student and teacher.
- Two-way communication is possible by exchanging the views between teacher and learner.
- Consideration of learners as individuals rather than grouped.
- Educators are considered as an industrialized form.

Traditionally, it has been observed that educational instructions through distance education were provided through print or electronic communication media. It has been provided to persons who are involved in planned learning in a place or time which is different from that of the instructor or instructors.

Due to technological advancement, the traditional definition of distance education is vanishing from its sight because new technological developments challenge educators to reconceptualize the idea of schooling and lifelong learning. With the development of new communication technology, interest in the unlimited number of possibilities of individualized distance education is growing day by day. Although, it has been accepted by all, educational technologists, that it is, only due to the systematic design of instruction that can bring development of distance education. It is due to the rapid development of computer related technologies that has captured the attention of the public. There are countries like USA which has seen rapid growth in the use of technology for distance education, but maximum pioneering work has been done in abroad.

It was in the 1840s that the first distance course in the modern sense was provided by Sir Isaac Pitman. He started to teach a system of shorthand to the students by mailing the texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards, and afterwards, he was receiving transcriptions from his students in return for correction. This factor of student feedback of Pitman's system was a crucial innovation one (Alan Tait). It was in 1840 (IAP) this scheme was made possible by the introduction of uniform postage rates all over England.

However, this early beginning proved itself very successful. It was 3 years later that the phonographic correspondence society was founded to establish these courses on a more formal basis. In this way, the society laid a stone for later formation of Sir Isaac Pitman Colleges across the country (Moore and Kearsley et al. 2005).

In the USA, the first correspondence school was the Society to Encourage Studies at Home, founded in 1873.

Distance Education and the Developed World

While assessing the distance education scenario in the developed world, it presents a very bright and prospective picture for the twenty-first century. The Open University in UK, that is UK Open University, plays an important role in the country, and it has also become the country's largest university which plays a very prominent role in the credit transfer and award validation mechanisms that knit British higher education and training together (John Daniel 1995). This university played a model for various other countries. For example, many developing countries had adapted the distance learning system of UK Open University in their countries. If we assess the European Distance Education Network, it shows that the European countries have accepted the strength of the distance and open learning system as part of their educational enterprise. There are countries like Australia, Japan and North America that have developed their own distance teaching and learning systems in various forms which are flexible enough to cater to the varied needs of their different learner clientele (Sewart and David 1995).

It is due to the advancement in communication technology in the developed countries which has been incorporated in distance and open learning institutions making the individualized teaching and learning very effective. It is due to well-established academic traditions and wider provision of basic primary and secondary education which has created a strong foundation for providing higher vocational and unconventional educational programmes to those adult people who have very limited or no access to campus-based face-to-face education in the different areas at the tertiary level.

When we assess the characteristics and prominent features of distance and open learning system of advanced countries, then we would be able to understand the complete situations of those countries. For example, the various developed countries like Canada, USA, UK, Germany, France, Japan, Australia where the system of distance and open learning is functioning very effectively due to various reasons can be stated like this:

- Adult learners in developed countries have an appreciable degree of basic, primary and secondary education.
- The medium of instruction in these countries for providing distance education is through the mother tongue of the learners.

- There are maximum facilities of latest technology and communication provided to the learners.
- There are well-equipped and advanced institutions for which the learners have easy accessibility of these facilities.
- Availability of sufficient resource mobilization.
- There is very expertise, committed academic leadership.
- The curriculum is very flexible and need-based.
- Very qualified, committed and trained staff.
- Educational programmes are well planned and implemented effectively.
- The student support services are provided adequately and efficiently.
- Provision of continuous evaluation and monitoring.
- Provision of review and evaluation.
- There is a political support to back up the projects and institutions.

It can be revealed while going through the history that the advanced countries in the West and also a country like Japan had developed a very good network of communication systems. In the nineteenth century, in Europe, the process of transportation and communication was speeded up due to the development of locomotives, road transport, steam navigation, telegraphs and telephones. The nations were able to improve their transportation to carry out their economic, trading, commercial and military activities successfully due to industrial revolution. As a result of all these advanced technological developments, the efforts were still going on to find out new ways of teaching and learning; though the pace of it was slow, it was going on. Humanistic education was struggling against the blind faith and centuries-old sectarian and religious dogmas in the nineteenth century when the most dominant mode of teaching was the campus-based classroom teaching. It was with the efforts of Sir Isaac Pitman, who planted the seed of the modern correspondence education. In the year 1840, Sir Isaac Pitman started offering postal tuition on shorthand in Britain. At that time, he would have imagined that his small educational venture would take the form of a significant system of education which will spread over the globe after a century, i.e. in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. MDE-411, Block-5, pp-71–72.

Distance Learning and the UK

The using of technology was started when British Open University was established in the year 1969. In this way, it has supplemented well-designed courses by providing print-based material to the learners. This learning material was provided to maximum number of learners, especially in three programmes, for example, at the level of under graduation, post-graduation and to the associate students. The course material which was provided to these learners was in the form of print material only, but the students were supported by using various kinds of technologies for enhancing the comprehension of the subject matter. For taking the admission in the

British Open University, it was not compulsory that one should have attained any kind of formal educational qualification. Before delivery of the courses, these were closely monitored. After rigorous monitoring of these courses, then only these were delivered successfully to more than 100,000 learners. The Open University model was adopted by many countries not only by developing countries, even the developed countries have adopted it due to the outcome of direct results of its success (Keegan 1986). The researchers in the UK has played the role of leaders for the identification of problems and further proposing the solutions for the practitioners in the field (Harry et al. 1993). In the British University, there was a centre, known as the International Centre for Distance Learning. The role was to maintain the complete holdings of the literature which contains both research and practice of international distance learning. All the material concerning distance education was available through online or quarterly accessions lists. This available material contains various forms, for example, course modules, books, research studies, journal articles, evaluation reports and other ephemeral material.

The System of Distance Education and the United States

The introduction of distance education in the marketplace in the USA was very slow. But when this education was entered, it was felt that this distance education was unique to its needs evolved. There may be some of the countries which may not have the economic problems or there may have some illiteracy problems with the developing nations, but it was found that the USA had never faced the problems of economy of delivery. Even, there were other problems like the shortages of teachers in various areas, like math, science and foreign languages combined to it with state mandates to rural schools which produced a climate. It was the period of late 1980, when it was felt that this period was very conducive for the growth of the commercial courses which were offered via satellite in Texas at Oklahoma State University by the TI-IN Network, and it was in the year 1989 that all the states have taken the steps to start distance learning programmes, whereas in the year 1987, there were less than ten states which had taken the initiation to start distance learning. But it was only after one year, the number was increased to two-thirds of the states. It was in the report, given by the (Office of Technology Assessment, in the year 1989), which has been considered one of the important political documents and this report describes the state of distance learning and also describes the role of teachers and reports of local, state and federal projects. This report also describes the use of technology in the schools of USA. There are two projects which serve the example of operating video networks which are functioning efficiently and cost-effectively, and these projects are named as the Iowa Educational Telecommunications Network and the Panhandle Shared Video Network.

Presence of Distance Education as a Movement at the Global Level

Due to the progress of distance education in Europe and Western countries, now it has emerged at global level. It had been written in a recent report that a European Open University to begin in 1992 which was proposed by 12 members of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. It was the outcome of the direct response to the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and the European Community (Bates 1990). It was written in the report by describing the articles from authors in nine European countries describe the use of media and technology in higher Education in Europe and further it has emphasized upon the need for providing unified educational access in the form of a European Open University to a culturally diverse segment of population. With the use of technology, it has linked the people at the global level. It is also the telecommunication network which circles the globe and the borders of our global community continuing to shrink. Due to this, we are making our continuous efforts to search for new methods and ways to improve communication by providing maximum access to information on an international level. There are two most cost-effective ways which can provide the solutions to the problems of sharing information and promoting global understanding among these people: these are emerging communication technologies and telecommunications. Due to the advancement in technology, it has been felt that the extent to which the information is being provided to the masses will increase year by year. For easily accessing to the information, economic and political power plays an important role. Many educators like Takeshi Utsumi, President of Global Systems Analysis and Simulation (GLOSAS) have worked to develop such kinds of models of the Global University and the Global Lecture Hall which are contributing to provide such kinds of resources which are allowing to less-affluent countries so that they may keep up their pace to bring advancement in global research and education by making their unstinted efforts (Utsumi et al. 1990).

Distance Education and the Developing Countries

There are millions of people around the world who wish to access higher education but are not able to do so. The reason for this is that there are massive problems in the world due to which they are unable to get the educational opportunities for themselves as well as for their children. These problems are, for example, poverty, illiteracy and various kinds of diseases. There is only one solution to all these problems, that is, online learning. Online learning is one way of distance learning which can provide an opportunity to the distant learners and which can bridge the gap of disparities to access higher education across the developing countries. It is only through this system where the governments or other private organizations do

not have to spend a lot of investment in the establishment and expansion of traditional universities. In most of the developing countries, for example, like Bangladesh, distance education gives an opportunity to its population by which the information can be provided, through which new ideas, attitudes and an understanding can be cultivated through the layers of the disadvantaged surrounding and environments (Shah 1989). The various developing countries like India, Pakistan and China and these countries have adapted the model of the British Open University. These countries with the combination of the modern methods of teaching and emerging technology have provided low-cost instruction for basic literacy and for providing professional skills as well as job and vocational training. Turkey has recently joined those nations which are involved in large-scale distance learning. It is only twelve years old that their distance education programme which has enrolled almost one million learners and is the sixth largest distance education programme in the world (Demiray and McIsaac 1993).

The system of distance and open learning has shown a tremendous growth during the last few decades. It has been noticed that the demand of this open and distance learning has been increased due to various reasons. The most important reason of its demand is due to the weightage given to use of information and communication technologies and for the associated potentials for new innovations in providing learner support services to the distant learners.

Different scholars have defined the meaning of distance education in different ways. In the views of Sherry (1996), the definition comprises a few components: there is a distance between teacher and the learner in terms of space and time, a learning process; the communication between the teacher and taught is possible through the use of print media and information and communication technology. The learning in this system is under the control of the learner rather than that of the teacher. In this way, this definition demands that distance learning is to be supported effectively, and therefore, the learners have to depend on both paper and pencil and use of information and communication technologies. They have to collaborate with themselves and take care to develop their study skills (UNESCO 2002). It is due to lack of or limited use of information communication technologies because of power problems, shortage of ICT equipment and inability to use them; the main method of the students residing in rural areas has remained to use paper and pencil, especially in developing countries (Brahimoh and Osiki 2008).

International Agencies and its Role

There are many international agencies which can play an important role in the promotion of globalization of distance education. To name a few of these agencies are: Asian Development Bank, COL, UNESCO, World Bank, etc. The competencies of distance education institutions can be strengthened by these international agencies in the developing countries for the cooperation and collaboration with institutions in the developed countries on equal terms. In this direction,

commonwealth of learning is making its efforts by building data bank on reliable and comprehensive information on distance education, Commonwealth Credit Bank for transfer of programmer and credits, etc. (Dhanarajan et al. 1996). For the purpose of ensuring the elimination of unfair competitive practices, the other international agencies should develop norms and guidelines for global distance education programmes.

After knowing the history of the system and its functioning in the developed and developing countries, it is imperative to know to what extent it is catering the educational needs of the learners through learner support system.

The System of Students Support in Distance Education

In the system of distance education, the aim of this system is to provide the educational facilities to the learners as they are located at a distance from a university, college or a school. In the views of Simpson (2000), the learner's support system in distance education mode can be defined to provide all the activities and facilities beyond the production of course material and further the delivery of the same which assist in the progress of the studies of the learners. These can be in the form of all types of facilities, provision of supplementary reading materials and references, administrative assistance, human interaction like interaction between teacher and learner, peer group interaction, advice and even moral support.

The learner support can be divided into two areas:

- Academic support services
- Non-academic support/administrative support.

Academic Support Services

In the system of distance education, the provision of distance education support is provided to the learners in various ways. Generally, a mechanism is evolved by which support is provided to the learners at various stages, for example, pre-entry stage, during studies and post-study stage. In conventional education system, the learner gets maximum opportunities to interact with their teachers and friends, but in distance education mode, the distance between the student and teacher can be bridged by making the interaction through learner support centres and by making use of electronic and communication media.

This academic support is provided through teachers, counsellors, tutors and distance education facilitators who facilitate the learners to enable them to solve their academic problems. According to Simpson (2000), distance education deals with supporting the students to solve their problems or issues related to cognitive, intellectual domain which can be the outcome of pursuing their course or courses of

studies. These issues or problems might be related to the development of learning skills, knowledge and literacy.

With the technological advancement, comprehensive support is provided to the learners, besides the traditional technologies such as print material, broadcast television and radio. In this way, new technology enhances the comprehension of the subject matter and also brings the qualitative teaching and learning support. In this way, these facilities include various interactive multimedia, computer-based learning packages, use of audio and video tapes, audio and video teleconferencing and video on demand. Due to the advancement of the information and communication technology, it provides the opportunity to the learners for facilitating the interaction and possibility increases to easily access instructional resources provided by computer communication network, which is popularly referred as Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW) or the Information Super Highway (Taylor 1997).

While studying the learners may face various problems, e.g.

- How to write the assignments and how to proceed with studies through reading the materials and how to use the multimedia inputs while undergoing the process of learning.
- Whether it will be helpful for the learners if they go through the print material available with them.
- How the learners will be helped when they feel that the language of the study material is incomprehensible.
- How the learners will cope up with his family engagements, office work, social engagements, etc.
- How the learners can organize the study schedule systematically.

Some of these types of questions come under the purview of academic support. This academic support is further classified under two heads.

Tutorial and Counselling Support

Tutorial Support

The academic counsellors provide different kinds of academic support at the initial stage of studies, during the course of studies when the learners are pursuing the different programmes and also when they have completed their studies. This type of help is provided to the learners in the learner support centres as well as in the laboratories/workshops, the Sunday/holiday classes, extended contact programmes, summer/winter schools, etc. Tutorials are also organized with the help of local area networking through ICT.

Counselling Support

The support which is provided to the learners includes advising and helping the learners when they face any type of problems while studying. This support has the following objectives:

- To make use of available information about a student to solve his problems.
- Mutual understanding is developed between the counsellors and the learners.
- Learners are helped to work out a plan for solving their difficulties.
- The learners are helped so that they may know their interests, abilities, aptitudes and opportunities.
- The learners are encouraged to develop special abilities and positive attitude among themselves.
- The learners are also assisted in planning for educational and vocational fields.

The learners are also helped to sustain their motivation in continuation of their study.

Non-academic Support/Administrative Support

In distance education system, the second category of student support system is non-academic support, and it means other than the academic support. This student support deals in terms of the organizational aspects of their studies (Simpson 2000). There are various examples given by which we can understand the type of support given to the learners; these are counselling services, course registration, orientation programmes, news bulletin and the student's association. The learner support system is an important service in distance education because through this support which is provided to the learners by educational institution because of the characteristics of distance learners, as these learners are isolated from their teachers as well as peer groups and also come from diverse backgrounds, for example, economic, social educational and occupational. The provision of such an educational support to the learners ensures to facilitate easy communication between the teacher and the taught as well as academic and other supporting staff like administrators which cater the administrative needs of the students (Kember and Dekkers 1987a, b; Sewart 1992a, b; Hillman et al. 1994a, b).

In an open and distance education learning system, the learners are to be provided all possible educational support because it is the essential component of the system. For running any system smoothly, it is essential that all the educational facilities are to be given to the learners because they are the most important stakeholders in any educational system. Therefore, distance education providers have to provide a quality learner support services possible to all of them as without their presence, a distance education programme will not succeed effectively (Ravisankar and Murthy 2000).

It is accepted by all the educators that the responsibility of learning is in the hands of the learners. The support which is provided to the learners should be learner-centred and meets the learners' expectations and needs. For achieving the educational and personal goals, the learners themselves are well aware or are in the best position to know what kinds of support systems are important. It is pertinent to mention here that distance education learners are adults and they are in the best position to determine quality according to their individual needs (Mellroy and Walker 1993).

Non-academic or administrative support is to be provided to the learners as per the details given below:

- The learners are to be made aware of the programmes available through distance mode.
- Availability of application forms for the learners or registration of various programmes through online mode.
- Information about credit transfer scheme.
- Distribution of study materials by post, at learner support centres or online.
- Conduct of entrance tests or Term End Examinations.
- Distribution of counselling schedule or made it available on the website.
- Making arrangement for practical classes or Term End Practical Examinations or other course-based activities.
- Organization of the evaluation or assessment of papers. Two-way communication with the learners of the progress made by them from time to time.
- Recording and resolving the grievances of the learners by adopting a proper mechanism.
- Maintain the database of the prospective learners as per the enrolment in various programmes year-wise and session-wise.
- Dealing with the queries of the fresh enrolled learners and all those learners who have got re-registration in various programmes.
- Other support is provided to the learners who want to change their learner support centres due to transfer of their parents, spouse, etc.
- The learners are also helped if they want to change course, medium of study or if they face any problem.
- Arrangements are also made for conduct of viva voce as per the requirement of various programmes.

Administrative support can be provided by making the use of technology like emails, sending SMSes to the learners or uploading the information on websites or passing it through newsletters, newspapers, radio, television, mobile, teleconferencing or through regional centres or learner support centres. MDE-413, Block-1, pp.15–17.

Evaluation of the Learner Support Services

Although student support services may differ from one educational institution to another institution, the motive of all is one only that is to overcome the isolation of the students and have a feel of belonging. Through the provision of quality support services, the students have the full faith in the system that they are not being left on their own in the academic journey while pursuing the programme of study. Crosby (1979) defines quality as conformance to fulfil the customer needs. Juran (1989) has also emphasized upon the importance of satisfying client needs. Quality is considered as fitness for use which includes to identify the customer needs and further attempts are made to meet these needs. Thus, when it is to be translated into educational terms, it can be equated with the learner-centred approach (McIlroy and Walker 1993). A prominent concept in current approaches to manage quality is keeping the students on the forefront (Nunan and Calvert 1991; Mills and Paul 1993; Robinson 1994) and further designing procedures and courses which match the students' needs as minutely or as closely as possible.

To assess the quality in distance education, it is primarily based on performance indicators of input and outcome measures and little attention has been paid to customer satisfaction as a measure of quality or through a fitness for purpose or use definition. For this, there is one reason; that is, both concepts are used synonymously (Abrami 1989; D'Apollonia and Cohen 1990). For bringing the quality in student support system, attention should be paid to know about what quality means to the distance education learners. It is mandatory that the distance education providers should take care of the needs and expectations of the learners. It is generally found that adult learners demand quality in the products and services offered by the distance education providers and value for their money. Therefore, in the system of distance education, adult learners are in the best position to assess the quality of the learners' support that is provided to them.

In distance education system for maintaining the quality of programmes, the learners are provided the feedback in various ways so that they may be benefitted from the student support services which are provided to them at the learner support centres; for example, for the assessment of assignments, the learners are provided the feedback so that they may improve their performance during Term End Examination. This is a major function of academic counsellors. Academic support is provided to the learners, and they have given the guidance on how to attend to different kinds of assignments incorporated as course requirements. The counsellors assess the learners' assignments to ensure learner performance in studies. They give comments to make learners aware of their progress in studies.

Importance of Learner Support Services

The learner support services play an important role in imparting quality education to distance learners, but their management is probably the toughest task. When a learner takes admission afresh in distance education system for the first time, he finds himself in an unfamiliar situation, because he has the experience of conventional education system where he receives the full-time support of the teacher in classroom. But in distance education system the course is completed by himself in the absence of a teacher. Another important factor is that the learners in this system are mostly adults and are basically part-time learners who are not sure of their capacities and capabilities. The learning experience for them may be unpleasant experience as they have lost touch with their studies. In the system of distance education, the main purpose of the learner support services is to promote self-study or independent study, particularly in the absence of regular face-to-face contact. However, the process of learning through the mode of distance education system requires the interaction of the learners, both with the materials and with the teacher. The quality of the support system affects learning, and this is the basic rationale for the purpose of learner support services in the system of distance education.

Learner-Specific Requirements

The position of the learner is very important in any system of education because the entire process of teaching and learning revolves around the learners. Therefore, in the system of the distance education it is assumed that he is a mature adult learner and wishes to learn at his own pace. For this reason, he feels sometimes isolation from his peer groups and teachers concerned. Because of the physical and psychological isolation, he needs academic and emotional support from the distance teaching teachers and the distance education institutions.

Course-Specific Requirements

For the purpose of providing course-specific assistance to the distant learners, it is felt that learner support services play an important role in the system of distance education. It starts with the pre-admission counselling and continues till the students complete the programme. The most of the learners get this support during the counselling sessions and for writing the assignments. For making the learners self-reliant, self-confident and independent, the print course material is to be provided to the learners. While evaluating the assignments which are submitted to the counsellors, they write the constructive comments on the assignments which work

as two-way didactic communication among the learners and counsellors. During counselling, the students are helped to solve their problems related to their study.

Learners Are Helped to Sustain Their Motivation

In the field of teaching and learning process, motivation is one of the most important factors. As the distance learners are generally the adult learners and they are simultaneously engaged in various social and other economic activities while pursuing their studies. It is very difficult for them to sustain motivation for completion of their studies. But with lots of efforts and proper counselling, the motivation level of these learners can be restored.

A learner in the beginning, when he joins a programme through the system of distance mode, he is motivated to some extent. Without motivation, nobody would like to spend their money and time to be successful in their studies. It is only the motivation by which the learners develop their interest to complete the programme. Motivation from distance teachers, tutors and counsellors at various stages helps the learners overcome their difficulties and give up the idea of dropping out from the programme.

Supply of Information at the Entry Stage is Very Helpful for the Learners

Accuracy and timely supply of information about the course and programme at the initial stage would help the learners decide about their strategies of learning. Timely admission, timely dispatch of study material, dispatch of counselling schedule and assignments submission schedule instil confidence in the learners and inspire them to study hard. If these services are not properly monitored, the students face difficulty and their performance level gets affected.

Timely Supply of Feedback on Evaluation of Assignments

The assignment responses submitted by the learners must be assessed, evaluated and commented upon and returned in time. The purpose of assignments is to teach the learners effectively by giving them timely feedback on their strengths and their weaknesses. This feedback is helpful to the learners in tracking their own progress. The very aim of distance education is defeated if in time feedback on the evaluation of assignments is not provided to the learners.

Need of Face-to-Face Counselling for Distant Learners

Counselling is very much necessary in distance education system. The isolated distance learners always need the opportunity of face-to-face meeting with their peer groups and teachers. Counselling sessions are one of the best channels through which the learners interact freely with the counsellors and peers and solve majority of their problems. It is, therefore, imperative on the part of distance education institutions to see that counselling classes are organized systematically and good counsellors are entrusted with this noble cause. This will bring motivation to a great extent and help to satisfy the very purpose of distance education.

Preparation of the Distant Learners for Examination

The preparation for the Term End Examination is a great challenge for the distance education learners. Timely conduct of examinations and timely declaration of results give tremendous amount of satisfaction to the distance education learners, and this motivates the learners to continue and complete the learning activities on time.

Student Support Services and Use of Communication Technology

As it has already been discussed due to isolation of the distant learners from their teachers and peer groups, the distinct learners are provided various student support services during the pre-entry of their programme, during their study and till they complete it. With the provision of print course material, audio–video cassettes and use of other electronic media, use of educational technology plays an important role in the present days for providing direct communication to the distant learners.

ICT plays an important role for the purpose of delivery of student support services effectively and efficiently. It has become inevitable for the distance learners that they may be benefitted by this technology. We can also notice the shift from mass produced generic resources to tailored personalized support and communications. This is prevalent in the context of globalization of the economy and the changing expectations of students as consumers.

Importance of Information and Communication Technology for Distance Learners

It has globally been felt that earlier distance and open education was relied mainly on giving the print material to the learners, use of audio–video cassettes, radio and TV broadcasting. But now these gazettes have been replaced by new online tools and technologies which have the power to transform the learning environment.

Reasons for Using Technology in the Institutions of Distance Education

To improve the quality of teaching and learning by adding suitable technology that increases the amount of interaction between the learner and a teacher and between learner and learner.

- To provide learners with suitable technology literacy for work and life.
- For the purpose of improving the access to quality education and training using online and mobile learning platforms.
- For reducing the cost of education.
- For the purpose of improvement of cost-effectiveness of education.
- To meet the technological imperative.

Benefits of Technological Developments

Here are the details given of technological developments which bring to the distance learners.

- Teachers and students can avail the benefits by making use of Internet and World Wide Web facility because this is the source of information and knowledge that provides an opportunity to the learners and teachers for self-development, and this facility can be incorporated into the classroom teaching environment also.
- By using email and other Internet-related feedback mechanisms, students can get opportunity to reduce isolation and time delay associated with distance education.
- Teaching and learning with enhanced graphics, animation, interaction and visualization can be enriched through the use of extraordinary pace of software development.
- For getting the greater opportunity for basic accessibility, video conferencing, online interactive learning and live interaction with the central place of a