

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INDIAN OPEN UNIVERSITY DISTANCE LEARNERS' ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT, STUDY HABITS AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS DISTANCE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY AT THE INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY IN INDIA

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Introduction

The Constitution of India provides for equal educational opportunities for all. However, the goals envisaged in terms of overall coverage, equitable distribution and quality of education are still very distant in all stages of education. The disparities among male-female, rural-urban and region to region are especially higher and significant in higher education.

The success rate of the efforts towards overcoming these disparities has rather been low. Consequently we could not achieve anything notable during the past five decades. In view of the fact that the world today is experiencing unprecedented changes spurred by the revolution in the information technology, rapidly increasing international trade, the newly emerging global economy envisages the need for trained manpower through higher and professional education. The Government of India has expressed its commitment to promote education in a planned manner. The task, however, is daunting. Almost half of our population does not enjoy access to even basic education. The situation is really pathetic.

Formal system of education has, in general, two constraints. One is spatial and the other is temporal. Education takes place within the campus and in classrooms and laboratories. It is confined to the earlier period of one's life generally from 6 to 25 years of one's age. In the era of continuing and life long education a new class of learners has emerged and for them education does not terminate at the end of formal schooling. It is a life long process, which covers the entire life span of an individual. So we need today a system that helps transcend these limits of formal system and satisfy the learners immediate and long term needs. Distance education provides the answer to such situations. It has a prominent role to play for education of the people with focus on the human resource development. In India, we have at present eight open universities including one National open university and more than fifty directorates of distance education/ correspondence education attached with the conventional universities imparting education through distance mode mainly at the tertiary level. Besides these, there are twelve open schools including one National open school imparting education up to senior secondary level through distance mode.

Rationale for the Study

Distance Education refers to various forms of educational activity in which learners are physically apart from the teacher or the teaching institution for much of the teaching and learning process (Rumble, 1989). Distance Education is emerging as a distinct discipline by itself and has drawn attention of educational researchers to probe various aspects of this innovation in foreign countries especially in the countries like U.K., Canada and Australia and also now in various Asian countries including India. This is bound to lead further improvement and investigation of a variety of new communication media, which are now easily available.

By comparison, little research has been devoted to exploring factors that predict the success of distance learners (Cookson, 1989). Furthermore, the research that does exist has concentrated largely on demographic correlates of student success (Biner *et al*, 1995). An analysis of the researches conducted in India at the doctoral level reveals that majority of them were focused on the distance education in the country as a whole or institution wise or on its economy. Sahoo (1994) reported that 'most of the studies are of exploratory type. They are useful in understanding the status of distance

education. Only a few studies focus on facilitating decision making of distance education at Macro and Micro levels... It is evident from the review of studies that empirical researches highlighting the contribution of learner's characteristics to success in distance learning system have been neglected with a few exceptions such as those conducted by Das (1992), and Renu (1990). Other researchers took it as a component in their study e.g., Anand (1979), Gomathi (1982), Khan (1982), Pillai and Mohan (1983), Sahoo (1985).

A careful scrutiny of the meagre research available in the field of distance education leads one to believe that it is growing field with vast research potential. Surveys of research in education in India vouch for it. It is also clear that the battery of predictors generally used to predict the success in formal system may not be adequately do justice. Dearth of researches in the area of distance education particularly at the first degree level on the one hand and inadequacy of existing research evidence to predict the satisfaction and success of distance learners on the other have served as motivating factors for undertaking the present piece of research so as to fill in the important research gap. In view of the importance of Learner characteristics in the success of the system, the researcher was inclined to study the learner characteristics by focussing on certain variables like academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education as predictors of academic performance of first degree level distance learners.

Variables of the Study

(a) Independent Variables

- i. Learners' Academic self-concept
- ii. Learners' Study Habits
- iii. Learners' Attitude towards Distance Education

(b) Dependent Variable

- i. Learners' Academic Performance

(c) Moderator Variables

Learners background variables such as

- i. Sex (Male/Female)
- ii. Age (Below 25/25 and above)
- iii. Marital Status (Married/Unmarried)
- iv. Locale (Urban/Rural)
- v. Social Class (SC ST/Non SC ST)
- vi. Academic Stream (Arts/Commerce)
- vii. Educational Level (+ 2 pass/ Non +2)
- viii. Employment Status (Employed/ Unemployed)
- ix. Experience in Distance Learning (Experience/No Experience)
- x. Discontinuity in Studies (1-2 years/ More than 2 years)

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives were formulated for the study:

- i. To assess the background characteristics of the first-degree level distance learners of Delhi and adjoining areas.
- ii. To explore the patterns of academic self-concept, study habits and attitudes towards distance education among distance learners of Delhi and adjoining areas.
- iii. To study the significance of differences in the academic self-concepts of first-degree level distance learners differing in certain background variables.
- iv. To examine significance of differences in the study habits of first-degree level distance learners vis-a-vis their background.
- v. To compare the attitude of first-degree level distance learners towards distance education in various subgroups based on background variables.
- vi. To study the relationship of academic self-concept with academic performance of distance learners at first-degree level.
- vii. To investigate into the association of academic performance with study habits practiced by distance learners at first-degree level.
- viii. To examine the extent of dependence between academic performance and attitudes of distance learners towards distance education at first-degree level.
- ix. To predict academic performance of first-degree level distance learners on the basis of their academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education.
- x. To study the relative contribution of the predictor variables (Objective ix) towards variance in the criterion viz., academic performance of distance learners at first-degree level.

- xi. To draw some significant conclusions with regard to academic performance of first-degree level distance learners in the context of the battery of predictor variables.
- xii. To suggest on the basis of findings, various ways of enhancing academic performance of distance learners at first-degree level.

The Method

In order to achieve the objectives, Normative Survey method was used for investigating the inter-relationships among the variables viz., academic self-concept, study habits, attitude towards distance education and academic performance.

The Population

The population for the present study was identified as the distance learners who were undergoing the Bachelors' Degree Programme (BDP) of the IGNOU Regional Centre, Delhi. The population was further limited to the final year students of BDP (Arts and Commerce Stream) who had applied for the term end examination conducted in the month of December, 1994.

The Sample

As per the address list provided by the computer centre of the IGNOU Regional Centre, Delhi, there were about 760 distance learners (BA and B.Com. stream only) applied for the term end examination conducted in December, 1994. It was decided to contact all the subjects covering the entire population. The responding subjects were considered as a random lot of candidates for inclusion in the sample. The final sample for the present study consists of 318 distance learners of the IGNOU Regional Centre, Delhi.

Tools

As the study involved 3 main variables, namely, academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education, the following three tools were employed for measuring these three independent variables in the study.

- i. Academic Self-concept Scale developed by the Researcher
- ii. Study Habits Inventory for College Students developed by S.K. Jain (1967) (used with modification).
- iii. Attitude Scale towards Distance Education developed by the Researcher.

In addition to these three tools, a Personal Information Sheet was also developed and administered to get background information of the distance learners. A master sheet was prepared to collect information regarding the dependent variable 'Academic Performance' of distance learners, which were gathered from the Evaluation Division of the IGNOU, New Delhi.

Procedure for Data Collection

There were about 760 learners, who had applied for the term-end examination held in December, 1994. The tool booklet was sent to all the 760 distance learners. The initial response was very poor. However, with a number of repeated reminders, the researcher could get back a total of about 325 tool booklets. There were about 7 booklets incomplete and partially attempted. These were not counted for scoring purpose. Thus the final sample consisted of 318 distance learners.

Statistical Techniques Used

The following statistical techniques were employed for analysis of the data:

(i) Percentage

Percentage was used mainly to analyse the background characteristics of distance learners.

(ii) Mean and Standard Deviation (SD)

Mean scores and SDs were calculated to know the level of academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education of the selected sample of distance learners.

(iii) 't' test/C.R. Values

C.R. values were computed to know the significance of difference between the mean scores of distance learners on three independent variables namely academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education differing in their background variables.

(iv) Pearsons' Product Moment Correlation

Pearsons' Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed to determine the relationship between the 3 independent variable, namely, academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education with the academic performance of distance learners.

(v) Multiple Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression Equations

Multiple Correlation and Regression Equations were used to determine the degree of prediction of academic performance of distance learners (dependent/criterion variable) by treating academic

self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education as independent/explanatory variables.

Major Findings

The major findings are systematically presented in order of the objectives of the study.

A. Findings pertaining to the Background Characteristics of Distance Learners

- ◆ Majority of the sampled distance learners (67.7%) were enrolled for the Bachelors Degree Programme (BDP) in the year 1991. The remaining 32.3 per cent learners were enrolled since 1988 and on wards.
- ◆ Of the total sample of distance learners, 67.6 per cent were males and the rest of them were females.
- ◆ More than 70 per cent of distance learners were in the age group of 25 years and above.
- ◆ Marital status-wise, the distance learners were equally divided as married and unmarried ones.
- ◆ About eighty percentage of distance learners hailed from urban areas and belonged to non SC/ST category and pursued B.A. academic stream.
- ◆ More than half of the distance learners (52.2%) were not having the basic qualification, i.e., +2 or equivalent certificate at the time of enrollment to the BDP.
- ◆ Of the selected distance learners about sixty per cent of them were employed ones.
- ◆ Only 19.8 per cent of the learners had an experience of learning through distance mode prior to their present enrollment.
- ◆ More than fifty per cent (52.8%) of sampled learners had a gap of more than two years in their studies in reference to the present (BDP) course.

B. Findings Pertaining to the Nature of Distance Learners' Academic Self-concept, Study Habits and Attitude Towards Distance Education

- ◆ The first-degree level distance learners were found to possess above average academic self-concept when examined for total sample and the sub-samples based on the background characteristics of learners.
- ◆ The first-degree level distance learners were found to exhibit good study habits when examined for the total sample and the sub-samples based on the background characteristics of learners.
- ◆ The first-degree level distance learners displayed above average, positive and favorable attitude towards distance education when examined for total as well as for sub-samples based on the background characteristics of learners.

C. Findings Pertaining to the Significance of Differences Between Means on Distance Learners' Academic Self-concept, Study Habits and Attitude Towards Distance Education vis-a-vis Their Varying Backgrounds

- ◆ The first-degree level distance learners seemed to differ significantly in their academic self-concept with respect to their academic stream and employment status. The BA distance learners and unemployed distance learners were found to possess significantly higher academic self-concept as against their counterpart B.Com. And employed distance learners.
- ◆ The study habits of first-degree level distance learners were found to differ significantly with respect to the five background variables namely: (i) marital status, (ii) social class, (iii) academic stream, (iv) employment status and (v) experience in distance learning. Married distance learners, SC/ST learners, B.A. learners, unemployed distance learners and the learners having experience in distance learning demonstrated better study habits as against their respective counterparts.
- ◆ The first-degree level distance learners were found to differ significantly in their attitude towards distance education as per their marital status. The married distance learners showed significantly higher attitude towards distance education as against their counterpart unmarried distance learners.

D. Findings pertaining to the Relationship of Distance Learners' Academic Performance with Academic Self-concept, Study Habits and Attitude towards Distance Education

- ◆ There exist a moderate positive and significant correlation ($r=0.4714$) between academic performance and academic self-concept of first-degree distance learners.
- ◆ A low positive but significant relationship ($r = 0.27$) was noticed to exists between academic performance and study habits of first-degree distance learners.

- ◆ A low positive and significant relationship ($r=0.24$) was found to exist between academic performance of first-degree distance learners and their attitude towards distance education.

E. Findings pertaining to the Prediction of Academic Performance of Distance Learners

- ◆ A set of three predictor variables viz., academic self-concept, study habits and attitude towards distance education yielded a multiple correlation coefficient of the order of 0.47283 and accounted for about 22.37 per cent of variance in the criterion variable of academic performance of first degree level distance learners.
- ◆ Considering the 3 variable battery of predictors, it was found that academic self-concept appeared to be the most important predictor variable with a contribution of 23.92 per cent of variance in the criterion measure academic performance. While the other two (study habits and attitude towards distance education) acted as suppressor variables.
- ◆ A prediction equation was developed which is stated below:

$$X1 (AP) = 0.43007 X2 (ASC) - 0.03038 X3 (SH) - 0.0124 X4 (ADE) - 23.65197$$

The above equation appears to suggest that for each unit increase in academic self-concept (ASC) first-degree distance learners' academic performance (AP) gets increased by 0.43 points. Contrary to this unit increase in study habits (SH) and attitude towards distance education (ADE) appears to induce a corresponding decrease of 0.03 and 0.01 points in the predicted scores.

On the basis of the present study it may be mentioned that somehow necessary attempts should be made to create an environment through the print/non-print media and in personal contacts with distance learners, which may help boost up their academic self-concept besides providing guidance on good study habits, if the performance of distance learners is to be enhanced. Further, solving the individual problems (if any) and providing maximum facilities of support systems may help developing positive attitude towards distance education among distance learners.

The above findings appear to be significant with a view to streamline this new approach of distance education in the country. Various implications of the study are highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Implications for Learner Support and instructional Design

The findings of the study have certain significant educational implications. These findings have direct implications on learner support and instructional design for the distance learners. These are systematically presented below.

- Analysis of the background characteristics shows a varied nature of distance learners at the first-degree level. This may be utilised for future planning of the programmes and need analysis of the learners at the open and distance education institutions/universities.
- Distance education institutions may tailor their self-instructional materials development programme in such a way that it should raise their academic self-concept and inculcate good study habits of learners if quality performance was aimed at.
- Distance education institutions should provide maximum possible facilities to learners in order to develop among them a positive attitude towards distance education in general and their course studies in particular.
- Study centres of the distance education institutions may be equipped with sufficient manpower as well as materials to help the learners to carry out their studies more effectively.
- Counselling sessions should focus on developing a positive image of the learner in the learning activities.
- Academic Councillor's role needs to be redefined since mere imparting of factual information of the content is not sufficient.
- Monitoring of academic performance has to be done by the distance learning institutions on regular basis in order to enhance the performance of first-degree distance learners.
- Distance learning institutions should not only keep on increasing the enrollment but also keep on their agenda the learning needs of distance learners and address them appropriately.
- Distance learning institutions should devise a mechanism of keeping distance learners highly motivated until the completion of their course.
- Distance learning institutions should make efforts to undertake researches on acceptability of curriculum, changing needs of learners, evaluation procedures, feedback systems and the efficacy of learning materials as their regular future.

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