

What ails Indian Distance Education Research?



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Abstract

Distance Education is very popular in India as reflected in the number of Open Universities and dual mode distance teaching institutions in the country. However, research in the field of distance education as a discipline is only a recent phenomenon. The Indian Journal of Open Learning (IJOL) published since 1992 is one of the oldest and most significant research dissemination vehicles for Indian distance education researchers. However, publications by Indian researchers in other journals in the field are very limited. Based on the authors experience as researcher, editor and reviewer of research in distance education, in India and elsewhere, the paper explores issues related to why Indian distance education research has not been able to grow in the last 50 years. What efforts are being made to conduct research and development in this area of study that affects the educational life of over 6 million learners in the school and higher education sector? What measures are needed to improve the standards of research in terms of quality and quantity? It presents a set of generic guidelines for researchers to reflect and consider.

Transcript

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to be amongst teachers concerned about research and development in Open Distance Learning (ODL). It is indeed a matter of great interest to me having done some work in the field for several years in the past. Research to me is something that helps oneself to understand how little we know about a subject. This is more of a humbling experience than about finding something new. No worthwhile research is possible without standing on the shoulders of giants in the field. So, we borrow ideas, refine them and apply in new situation. Thus, research is a process of sharing and yet again about openness in education.

In my last role at the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), I promoted Open Access to scientific information and research. We defined scientific from the point of view of 'scientific method' covering all disciplines of knowledge and developed strategies on how research can be strengthened by making research information available in Open Access. Today there are over 8000 Open Access journals and over 3000 subject repositories of research literature. But only about 20% research publications are available in Open Access, others are accessible only on payment of subscription fees.

Today, my topic is research in ODL, and with reference to research in India and by Indian scholars. No ODL institution of higher education can meet the local socio-educational needs adequately and effectively, unless it engages in systemic research in order to make its products and services contextually purposeful (Koul, 2009).

The Distance Education (DE) system was introduced in India in the form of correspondence education to cope with the growing demands for higher education in the 1960s, though DE in some form or other is available in the world since 1728 (Holmberg, 1996). In spite of the growth and acceptability of DE, research in the core domain of DE has always been a matter of criticism (Coldeway, 1990; Moore, 1985; Phipps and Merisotis, 1999).

The report of the Madhava Menon Committee to suggest measures to regulate education through distance mode stated that distance education research has grown. It says

“Research and development forms the backbone of any system in order to bring in quality and standards. Being a dynamic system driven by societal, economic and technological changes, ODL has been changing rapidly and dramatically. The changing technological environment of distance education and paradigm shift affecting it needs to be periodically reviewed. Also the growing acceptance of open and distance learning system in our country and the innovations being an integral part of the ODL system it has become imperative to evaluate the system periodically. There is ample proof of growth of distance education research which is evident from the increasing number of journals, seminars, workshops, symposia etc analyzing the growth of the system” (Govt of India, 2011).

While research is the life blood for any discipline to grow, my previous researches in this field indicate that Indian research in distance education has not grown proportionately as that of the demands for higher education, the number of institutions and programmes available through distance mode. Today, I am reflecting on the status of distance education research based on some of my previous works and experience as editor of distance education journals and editorial board members of ODL journals.

The notion of open distance education being technology enhanced learning, research in this field is not necessarily getting published in the core journals of distance education. However, there are 12 most popular and widely read journals in the field of Distance Education (Zawacki-Richter, Anderson, and Tuncay, 2010), and to put the presentation in perspective I did a small search of some of these journals to understand how many research papers have been published by Indian scholars.

My analysis on the web shows that only about 71 papers are published in some six journals in the past:

Name of the Journal	Published Since	Number of Papers from India
International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning	2000	07
American Journal of Distance Education	1987	01
Distance Education	1980	08
Open Learning	1986	11
Asian Journal of Distance Education	2003	42
European Journal of Open Distance e-Learning	1997	02
Total		71

In a study published in International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (IRODL), number of Indian contributions reported are only 1.7% and at 6th rank (Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, and Vogt, 2009). Not a single Indian scholar featured in the list of top contributors, though the study excluded the *Indian Journal of Open Learning* (IJOL) without any justifiable reason.

In 1992, the Indira Gandhi National Open University started the *Indian Journal of Open Learning* (IJOL) that I edited for some time and also made it to an Open Access journal available online. The idea of an Indian journal on ODL was to promote research and development on distance education and encourage Indian scholars to take up research and provide them a platform.

In 2002 I analysed the research reported in 10 years of IJOL, and found that 66% of papers are from India. Descriptive studies covered 34% of the papers, followed by qualitative methods at 23% (Mishra, 2002). Another study of the *Indian Journal of Open Learning* by Tripathi and Kanungo (2010) revealed that about 50% of the articles published in the journal come from Indian authors. 32% papers were descriptive in nature, 23% used qualitative methods, and 20% used survey for research.

In a study that analyzed the distance education literature by examining the content of four refereed journals in distance education, it was revealed that more than 80% of the papers were contributed from five countries -- UK, USA, Australia, India and Canada; learner centered issues were the most popular and commonly written topics by the researchers. It also highlighted that the researchers in distance education commonly used survey method and collaborative research was on the rise (Mishra, 1997).

Systematic research in DE started in the second half of the twentieth century, but consisted mainly of case studies and more or less subjective material. Rekkedal (1994) mentions that, in the 70's, the distance education research projects report started with a regret of the lack of prior theory or empirical research

data on the problem or relevant for the problem in question. This, according to him, was a common phenomenon.

Quality of the research on DE is also questioned quite often. With reference to the quality issue, Calvert (1988) opined that most of the researchers in distance education have modest knowledge of pedagogical hypothesis, and have had limited training in social science research methodology and design. Moore (1985) also debated that the majority of the research published is descriptive and cannot be generalized, the researchers have failed to check with or refer to previous research, and he particularly regrets that experimental research under controlled conditions is practically missing. The neglect of reviewing relevant and existing research by researchers is a huge problem, particularly when new people join the DE and require more understanding of the system that is based on practical research. As DE practitioners we may be at a risk of wasting time and money with little steps towards understanding the research aspects of DE if the new researches do not build on what has been already done and studied. Ljosa (1980) reported that the bulk of research in DE derives from three sources: strong institutions with large research units, scattered individuals with a special interest in the field, and specially funded research projects. Calvert (1984) emphasized that the quality of research is much due to the people involved in the system and their nature of work. She puts it as:

“Distance educators, the one who know their system well usually are newcomers to the field and have their roots in other disciplines, even when they do have solid research skills, they still must ‘re-tool’ for this new research area. Furthermore, the emphasis in distance education system is in doing, not contemplation, most people in the field are administrators carrying a heavy workload. When special research units are established, they generally serve administration and focus on practical day-to-day issues” (p.1).

Panda (1992) analysed the Indian DE literature and concluded “most of the studies are either descriptive status surveys or experimental studies with poor methodological footing”.

While research in DE has been criticized and emphasized, we have not been able to question the problem of research as such. I along with my colleague (Nembiakkim and Mishra, 2010) analysed the problems underlying research in DE from the perspective of the researchers. We focused on the attitude towards DE research among people involved in distance education and the different kinds of barriers in conducting research in DE as a discipline.

Our research revealed some significant results and provides sufficient inputs for taking measures to improve research conditions in Distance Education in India. While the respondents were positively disposed towards research in distance education, and believed in the need for more research, that is quantitative and collaborative, they also indicated the need for using research results in day-to-day work in the system. They indicated less appreciation for qualitative research, which may be due to either over emphasis on quantitative paradigm in educational research or poor training in qualitative research or both. They also indicated the need for encouraging research on distance education and the need for rewarding good research work.

The respondents also indicted they do not use published research results for their work, though they are interested to read published research and use. This is an important factor in improving the acceptability of

distance education research and its quality. In order to improve the accessibility of research literature, it is important to have access to latest periodical publications in all DEIs and Open Universities in India.

While availability of time has been a major personal and institutional barrier for research, it has been a perennial problem of distance education system around the world, and it calls for two important actions. First, that the DEIs must create appropriate environment for research, where faculty members devote some specific time to research work, and second, individual faculty also must learn and adopt time management techniques as well as action research skills to undertake research in distance education. Lack of resource was the second most important barrier revealed in the study. Previously Zhang and Venkaiah (2000) reported that less number of institutional researches “can be explained by the limited funding for distance education research in India”. Discouragement to collaborative research in distance education also came out as a barrier, though not as strong as the time and lack of resources.

Koul (1993) has emphasized the need for collaboration in research and development in distance education for four reasons: collaboration can save resources as most institutions face similar problems, collaboration will improve communication across countries and institutions, collaborative research would facilitate student mobility, adaptation and adoption of courses, and collaboration would inculcate innovative practices and use of modern technologies. In view of this, it is important that appropriate policies are in place to encourage collaborative research within the institutions and amongst institutions in the country and abroad.

Choosing the right research problem, research design, and suitable reporting venue are critically important and foundational issues for research in distance education (Mishra, 1998). Largely I have found the problem of articulating the statement of research problem in most researches in distance education, and therefore it becomes difficult to get published. Certain administrative questions do not need research and can be solved through logical reasoning. Similarly, we do not need to compare always one system with the other. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and by comparing we do not add value to the research. Similarly finding learning impact form media has been a matter of concern for many research, while it is clear that learning happens not just due to one intervention, but due to combination of a variety of factors, including learner interest, need, and efforts.

After the problem, then comes choice of research methods, and this is where we find two groups of experts who either believe in quantitative method or qualitative methods. One group does not appreciate the low sample size in qualitative research, while the other thinks all quantitative studies are number crunching in computers and are often beyond reality. In practice, such stand points do not help research in DE, that needs both the approaches and therefore research method should fit the research question, and this is possible by appropriate training of researchers.

The next big problem is that we try to reinvent the wheel without trying to understand if the problem that we are facing has been really studied by others before and what their researches say on the topic. This is about doing a comprehensive review of literature, and putting the research questions in context, clarifying what is known and what are to be explored or studied.

The next problem of Indian distance education research is reporting style. Being non-native speaker of English that is the predominant language of research communication is a major problem for most of us.

Researchers feel shy to show their work to colleagues for comments, and think taking language help is something below standard. Such an approach puts researchers in more vulnerable position than seeking help for language editing before submission to journals.

In 2003 three of us started the *Asian Journal of Distance Education* to address this problem and help Asian DE researchers get published. The journal has been successful in its mission so far as we provide a platform to researchers in the region. Of late, I am not involved in the journal on regular basis. The journal has made a place for itself in the world of DE research, and I encourage young researchers to submit paper to the journal.

Last but not the least is the issue of research funding in the field of distance education. So far the Distance Education Council (DEC) has been responsible for funding support for distance education research. While the DEC Research project scheme was initially meant for encouraging research amongst distance educators in the State Open Universities, it has now been open to any teacher/academics interested in doing research in ODL system (Srivastava, 2012). In the past it has supported research to the tune of over 10 million rupees. Over the years, it has sanctioned over 56 major research projects and 40 minor research projects, of which only 45 have been completed. As such, we should expect these research reports to be available online and published as research papers in ODL journals. Besides DEC support, research on ODL topics is also undertaken by teachers at the Staff training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) and the G. Ram Reddy Research Academy of Distance Education (GRADE). Number of researchers in other universities has worked on their MPhil and PhD dissertation on topics related to ODL. Despite these opportunities, there is further need to strengthen research funding through national agencies. Also, it is important for Indian scholars to look for funding opportunities from international donor agencies that are interested in supporting research in social sciences.

Having reviewed the situation of DE research and its problem, I will now conclude by focusing attention on the research personnel. The quality of research output depends on the quality of researchers. Therefore, my humble submission to all researchers in distance education is to deeply engage in the discipline before embarking on research. While we may bring a new perspective or a methodological innovation to research based on our subject background and previous experience, it is important to understand the discipline of distance education and emerging educational technologies in context, including the socio-cultural and economic issues affecting distance education and distance learners. A strong foundation on distance education and educational research methods are essential pre-requisite for good research in the field. Therefore, it is important that research post graduate studies in distance education and research opportunities on distance education are available in Indian universities. Today, only a couple of universities have provision for research on DE, and only one university offers post graduate education on the subject. It is time that the situation is reviewed, and appropriate measures taken.

I am sure some of the problems identified will resonate during our discussions and you will try to implement some of the ideas to improve DE research in terms of quantity and quality.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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