

Perception towards Online Teaching-Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case of IGNOU Teachers and Academics

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic erupted due to Covid-19 has disrupted normal life and different economic, social, and educational activities globally, and India was not an exception to this changing situation. In India, a phenomenal change occurred in the education sector where state and central governments instructed or made it compulsory for educational institutions to go online and continue academic activities in the online mode. In this context, IGNOU and state open universities in India also entered to the online mode for teaching-learning (TL) and providing academic support services to learners. Teachers posted at the IGNOU headquarters and academics at the different regional centers got engaged with learners online to perform their respective responsibilities. Against this perspective, this research was conducted to find out the perceptions of teachers and academics on the effectiveness of online TL; the constraints faced by them; and also, to suggest measures toward making online and blended TL strategies more useful. To conduct this study, a structured online questionnaire comprising the above aspects was sent to teachers and academics of the university in the last week of January, 2022. A total of 63 responses from both the teachers and academics were received and analyzed. The findings of the study suggest academic functionaries of IGNOU were ready to take the challenge positively and self-efficacy helped them in adopting online and digital pedagogies; they improved their ICT skills, although requirement of further training in online pedagogies and instructional design was indicated by them; challenges like slow broadband and non-availability of robust technical support were also reported. The study may have implications for policy and practice of the world's second-largest university which operates within India and through 14 overseas study centers with accumulative learner enrolment of above three million.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Perception of Teachers and Academics, Online/Blended Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Problem

The global pandemic Covid-19 has rarely spared any part of the world from its infectious menace which impacted every sphere of normal activities, starting from business, economy, trade and commerce, tourism, and so on for almost two years. Novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) drastically impacted almost all establishments across the world including education, resulting in discontinuation of offline education (Haleem et. al., 2020). According to UNESCO (2020) over 320 million, students could not attend schools and colleges due to countrywide lockdown during the pandemic, while at the global level for the entire humanity this number was about 1.57 billion. However, this turned into a blessing in disguise in terms of implementation and use of educational tools and ICTs for educational transactions. Government and private educational institutions took the crisis as an opportunity for implementing distance online learning by utilizing various innovative emerging technologies. Gradually, online teaching-learning (OTL) emerged as a viable and interesting alternative for the pedagogical transition, supported by various digital platforms.

1.2 Context of the Study

The largest open university in the world, i.e. the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, operates within India and abroad with the help of various regional centres (RCs), overseas study centres, and learners support centres (LSCs) associated with different RCs across the country. It has an cumulative enrolment of about 3.2 million learners enrolled in different distance and online programmes (Table 1).

Table 1. IGNOU profile

Year of establishment	Schools of studies	Academic programmes	Learners Enrolled	No. of faculty	Regional centres	Learners' support centres	Academic counsellors
1985	21	250	3.2 million	250	67	2000	35000
No. of academics	Overseas study centres	Foreign footprint	No. of divisions	No. of institutes/centres	No. of units/cells	Recognition as Centre of Excellence	Award of Excellence for distance education material

						in distance education by COL	by COL
230	21	13 countries	12	09	05	1993	1999

Source: IGNOU Institutional Development Plan 2030 & university website.

Although this institution was engaged in teaching-learning through the open distance learning (ODL) mode, it's academic and administrative activities got heavily impacted by the lockdown and restrictions imposed due to Covid-19. RCs and LSCs were shut, and learners were cut off from their peer groups, and academic counselors, as they were not able to visit LSCs and RCs, and meet on-campus teachers. This gloomy situation pushed the learners to isolation and to the verge of huge academic loss. In this backdrop, the university geared up to go online in a massive scale by adopting emerging technologies. Faculty posted at the headquarters and academic staff at RCs took the prevailing situation as a challenge and started the process of transition from traditional ODL and learners' support to Online Teaching Learning (OTL) or Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) amid a continually shifting educational landscape. According to Hebebcı et. al. (2020), educational institutions switched over to OTL/ERT due to inadequate infrastructure and also to minimize the impact of Covid-19 on the teaching-learning process. Rapanta, et. al. (2021) opines that “when it comes to the so-called ERT, educators from all grades and contexts experienced the necessity of rethinking their roles, the ways of supporting the students’ learning tasks and the image of students as self-organizing learners, active citizens, and autonomous social agents”, p.715. Utilizing various tools and technologies, educational institutions entered into pedagogic transition (to online mode) to educate their learners (Asgar, 2022). Faculty and academics at IGNOU took the challenge head-on with the intention to facilitate student learning through online teaching (i.e. online academic counseling) and provide learners effective support services. In this context, the present research was conducted to explore the perception of teachers and academics on OTL and different issues linked with this pedagogical shift amid the massive crisis.

1.3 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the present study were:

1. To find out perception of teachers and academics of IGNOU on online teaching-learning.
2. To find out teachers, and academics’ perspectives on the advantages of OTL and constraints associated with the OTL pedagogy.
3. To examine the requirement of CPD in the field of digital and online teaching.
4. To suggest measures for making online and blended teaching-learning strategies more useful.

1.4 Review of Literature

The emergency situation posed by the Covid-19 forced educational institutions to introduce radical changes in pedagogical approaches and strategies to deliver academic programmes for uninterrupted TL. According to Mishra & Panda (2020), “crisis generates creativity, therefore institutions found appropriate solutions to ensure that students continued to learn. A range of technologies was used — printed text, radio, television, interactive radio instruction, community radio, multimedia, and online learning — based on the requirements of different constituencies”, p.03. The digital and OTL was the only viable alternative to face-to-face education and, therefore the prevailing transition phase propelled teachers to change their conventional pedagogical approaches through the use of emerging digital platforms (Joshi et. al., 2020) like GoogleMeet, Zoom, Microsoft Team, WebEx, Moodle, Blackboard, Google Classroom, and other social media platforms. Notwithstanding the lack of preparation and difficulties faced by teachers, the overall picture revealed openness toward innovation and new learning opportunities that were not as evident before (Hodges et. al., 2020). Rahayu and Yanty (2020) reported that teachers’ attitude toward OTL and their intention to use technology was found quite positive as they perceived this as an opportunity to develop their digital skills.

However, teachers and academics also faced numerous technological, pedagogical, and other challenges while resuming academic activities in the online mode, including: management of time, less awareness about OTL, lack of control over quality, complexity in adopting gadgets, low speed of or no access to internet, and insufficient digital resources (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). According to Almazova et. al. (2020), lack of computer literacy, IT environment and support, and academic staff non-readiness were major issues. Rahayu and Yanty (2020) reported challenges like an absence of quality student-teacher interactions, teachers’ inability to design exciting e-materials, and its’ delivery, and learner assessment. Shahid et. al. (2020) in their study on online medical education found that the majority of teachers confessed that theoretical medical curriculum could be taught through distance online mode, but assessment of competencies and practical skills could not be assured via online sessions. Kamal & Illiyan (2021) also revealed challenges like online evaluation, creating digital content, and lack of technological knowledge, though most of the faculty preferred a combination of both online and offline modes.

2. METHODS

2.1 Methodology: For the attainment of the research objectives, a descriptive online survey method was adopted to conduct this study.

2.2 Population and Sample: The population for the study comprised about 400 teachers and academics of IGNOU, and the online questionnaire was sent to all to have their consent and response. A total of 63 complete responses were received and analyzed.

2.3 Data Collection Tools: To collect the feedback from the sample, a structured online questionnaire (Google Form) was created. The survey instrument consisted of two parts, Part-A had items to gather a demographic profile of the participants like age, designation, gender, and working experience in ODL, while Part-B consisted of various questions on variables like accessibility to devices, internet connectivity, IT skills, self-efficacy, professional development, web enabled academic support (WEAS) and emergency remote teaching (ERT) to capture perceptions of the teachers and academics.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure: The Google Form (i.e. 15 items survey questionnaire) was emailed to the target group in the last week of January 2022. A total of 63 responses were received from both the categories of employees which were analyzed using MS excel, and the results have been reported in frequency and percent.

2.5 Delimitation: This study is delimited to Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.

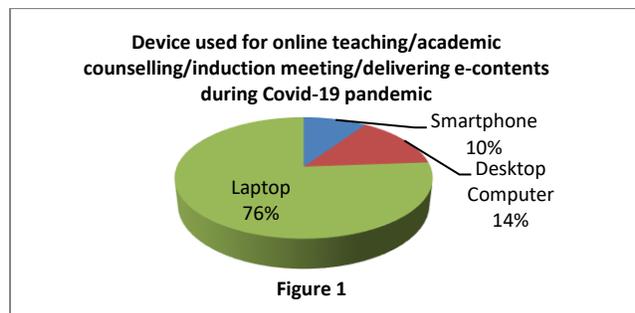
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first section of the tool was dealt with the characteristics of the respondents. It was found that the majority of the respondents (52%) were Assistant Professors, while Associate Professors and Professors were 9% and 17% respectively. Respondents from the Academics category (which included Assistant Regional Directors, Assistant Directors, Deputy Directors, Regional Directors, and Directors) constituted 21%. The details of the background of the participants are presented in Table 2.

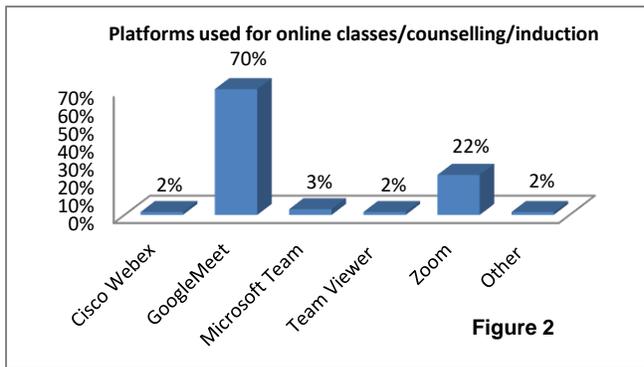
Table 2: Summary of participants' characteristics (n=63)

		No. of participants	Percentage
Designation	Assistant Professor	33	52.4
	Associate Professor	06	09.5
	Professor	11	17.5
	Academic	13	20.6
Age Group	30-40	16	25.4
	41-50	29	46.0
	51-60	15	23.8
	61 and above	03	04.8
Gender	Male	37	58.7
	Female	26	41.3
	Other	Nil	Nil
Experience in ODL	0-10 years	26	41.3
	11-20 years	27	42.9
	21-30 years	07	11.1
	31 years and above	03	04.8

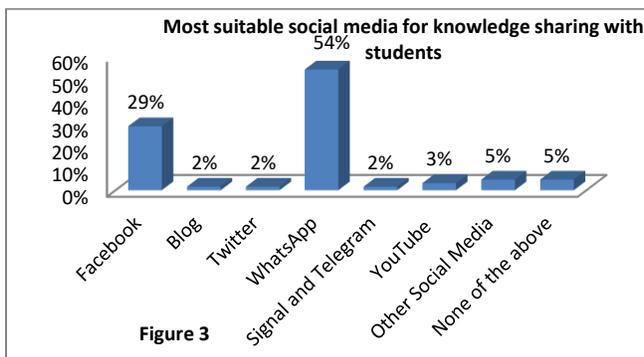
For the conduct of online teaching-learning, the role of devices becomes very important. During the study, the researchers explored the kinds of devices used by the participants during the Covid-19. Results showed that majority of teachers and academics (76%) used the laptop for academic counseling, learners' support and delivery of e-resources to the learners. Figure 1 shows the usage percentage of other devices too.



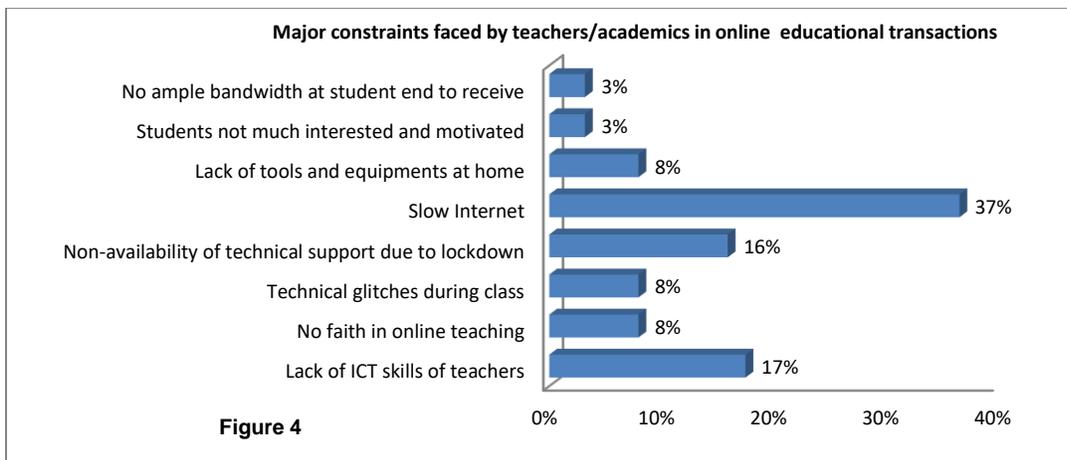
Besides, when the respondents were asked which online platform did they use for OTL and academic support, majority of them (70%) opined that they used GoogleMeet, while 22% used Zoom Meeting as reflected in Figure 2.



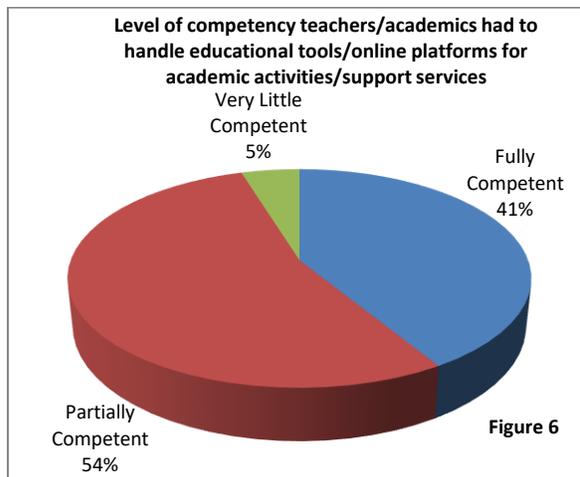
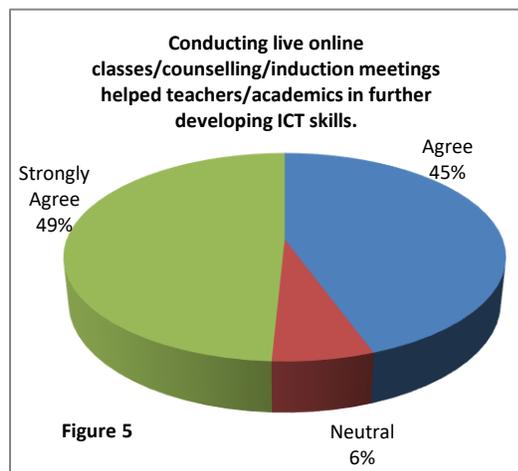
As far as usage of social media is concerned, majority of them (54%) reported that WhatsApp was most suitable tool for knowledge sharing with students, while 29% found the facebook as the suitable medium (Figure 3). Mishra et. al. (2020) has also reported that majority of the faculty members were found using WhatsApp as a mode of online curriculum transaction, because the teachers were accustomed to using it in their day to day life and it was also suitable for students to use anytime, anywhere.



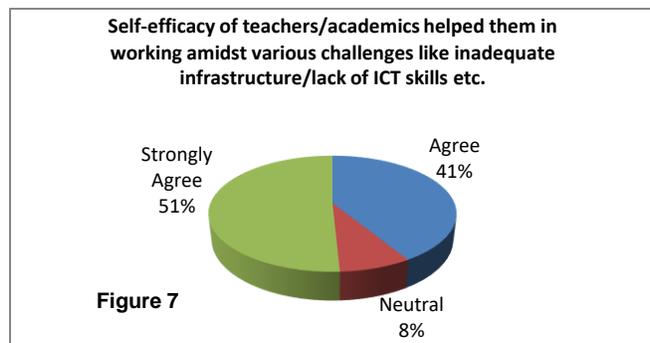
With regard to the major constraints in OTL, 37% teachers and academics reported that it was slow internet in their respective areas which hampered their tasks. 16% of them reported non-availability of technical support due to lockdown, and 17% reported lack of ICT skills (Figure 4). This corroborates the findings by Dhawan (2020); Mishra, et al. (2020) who reported unstable/slow network or no internet access as a major constraint faced by the academia. While Adnan and Anwar (2020) and Alea, et. al (2020) revealed that teachers' readiness for switching to OTL was high, but lack of IT skills, inadequate facilities and lack of upgraded equipment hampered it.



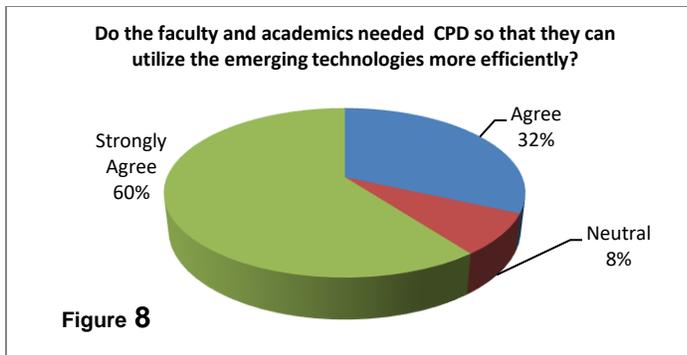
However, 49% of the respondents reported that they were able to improve their ICT-based knowledge and skills for OTL, and organised counselling and induction meetings during the pandemic (Figure 5). This result gets further support from the findings that majority of the participants (54%) reported partially competency to handle educational tools and online platforms for OTL, counselling, induction and support services for distance learners (Figure 6). 41% teachers and academics found themselves as fully capable of handling these activities. In a separate study, Gaikwad, et. al. (2020) found that online teaching made the faculty learn new skills and competencies.



Perception of teachers and academic on the self-efficacy was also gathered during the online survey to ascertain what were the contributions of their internal willingness and confidence over their capacity to perform certain tasks in emergency situation like Covid-19. Figure 7 shows that 51% strongly believed that their self-efficacy contributed towards accomplishing assigned tasks despite various restrictions and limitations during the crisis. Gaikwad, et. al. (2020) also reported that the “teachers supported this shift enthusiastically and did their best by learning while doing as most of them had not undergone any training to teach online”, p.23.)

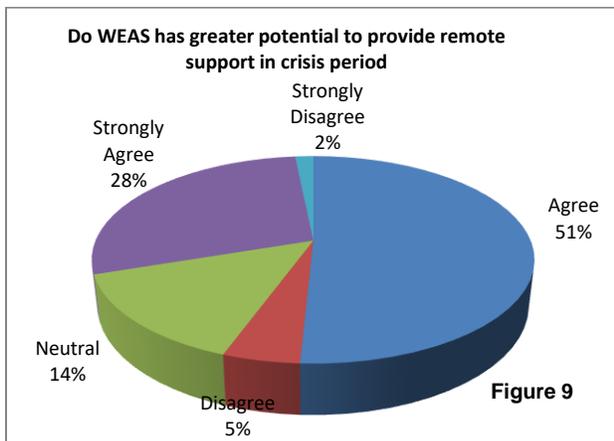


Despite good show in terms of self-efficacy, majority of repondents (60%) strongly agreed with the idea that they needed to be trained to get familiar with the emerging technologies and teaching-learning tools and handle them more efficiently (Figure 8). Mishra and Panda (2020) also emphasized that effective online learning required adequate planning, quality content and teacher capacity. Almazova, et. al. (2020) and Alea et. al. (2020) underline psychological, technological and methodological support and continuous professional development (CPD) to minimize the negative impact of the rapid changes and to ensure efficient online education. According to Bardoiloi, et. al. (2021), besides CPD, the systematic integration of technology in TL and utilization of low-cost technologies for content delivery is essential. Nevertheless educational institutions took initiatives towards CPD of teachers during Covid-19. Asgar and Ratra (2020) in their study on online CPD during pandemic, revealed that the number of CPDs conducted by higher educational institutions (HEIs) in the area of digital/e-learning, online teaching tools and learning management system were the highest. A deeper thematic analysis also revealed that themes related to technology-enabled online educational transactions were predominant.

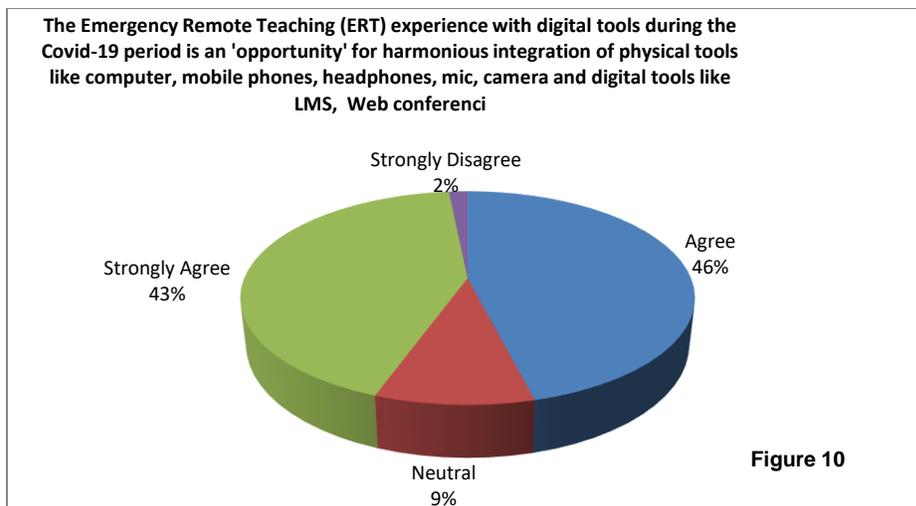


However, results suggest that HEIs will have to conduct more training programmes more frequently for teachers and academics to develop their capacities in the field of emerging teaching-learning tools and their utilisation to make OTL more meaningful and outcome-oriented.

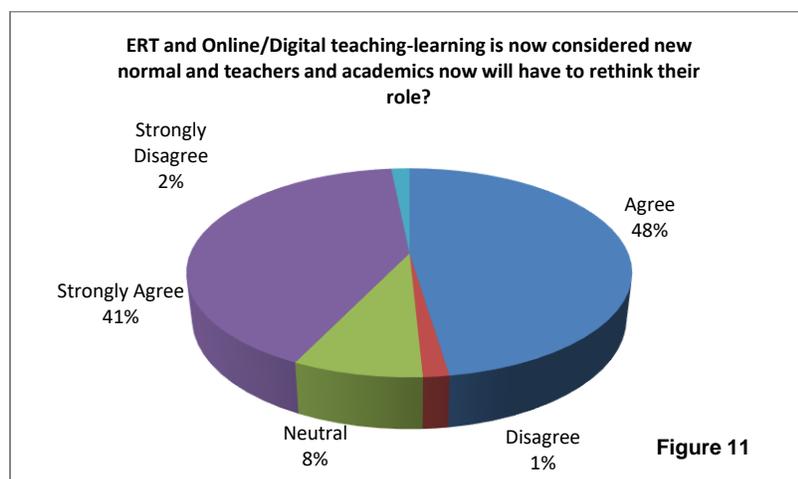
IGNOU also provides technology based academic support to the learners through Web Enabled Academic Support (WEAS) portal loaded with information, notification, important events/dates, e-materials, audio/video learning resources, discussion forum and quizzes (NCIDE, 2022). During the pandemic, the portal too played vital role in reaching to the learners and extending them remote academic support. Registering their views on WEAS, 28% respondents strongly agreed and 51% agreed that this platform has greater potential for providing academic support to learners as per their convenience. 14% remained neutral (refer to Figure 9).



Novel coronavirus created an unprecedented situation which compelled HEIs to adopt the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This transition further resulted in shift from chalk-and-talk method to digital online teaching and e-learning. As shown in Figure 10, perception of teachers and academics on this particular new teaching strategy shows that 43% of them strongly agreed while 46% agreed that their experience with ERT was useful in terms of meaningful TL and academic support services given to students, besides ERT unleashed an opportunity for harmonious integration of hardware, software and human capabilities.



Majority of them (41% strongly agreed; 48% agreed) reported that ERT or OTL is new normal, and teachers and academics will have to rethink and redefine their role amid changing technological scenario. Faculty will have to enhance their ICT skills as the proper integration of digital tools and technologies with pedagogies will make the technology-enabled TL more interesting, effective and outcome oriented (Figure 11).



5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Though Covid-19 surfaced with enormous challenges, those adversities were turned into opportunities by the educational institutions to explore better opportunities of technology enabled-learning. IGNOU was not far behind the other institutions in turning the disguise into blessings by making all sorts of arrangement for the ERT and providing effective support services through online mode for the continuity of learning at the time of crisis. This study showed that faculty and academics at IGNOU utilised contemporary digital platforms, social media for the curriculum transaction online. During the online TL process, they improved their ICT skills. Majority of them were found to be partially competent to handle the emerging educational tools, but self-efficacy helped them in fulfilling the assigned responsibility amid critical situation. They also expressed their opinion about the requirement of training or CPD to augment their skill further and make OTL more useful. Problems related to slow broadband was found to be major challenge, while lack of ICT skills and inadequate technical support were other issues faced by the respondents.

5.2 Implications

The post Covid-19 situation was unprecedented, making learning challenging to be accessible to the learners, OTL was the only available option before teachers to resume their tasks. This study focused on perceived advantages and key troubles faced by the teachers and academics in smooth execution of online digital TL. The findings shall

contribute towards understanding teachers, and academics, point of view on technology-mediated online teaching and other issues associated with the implementation of OTL strategies. The findings of this study shall help in identifying the gaps related to online digital pedagogy, teachers' preparedness and accessibility to technologies and chalking out future strategies by the teaching community, policy makers and authorities to make OTL more effective and meaningful. This study can be used as a basis for further research by IGNOU and other ODL institutions for developing institutional development plans (IDPs) and to better understand the status of their teachers' readiness, available skills and planning future CPD of teaching and academic staff. The findings shall be more relevant and useful as the recently announced *National Education Policy* (NEP-2020) gives paramount importance to digital online and blended teaching and learning. The findings would also persuade educational institutions for enhancing the quality of OTL by embracing the newest instructional strategies and preparing their faculty accordingly.

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