

# Professional Development through ODL during the Pandemic: A Comparative Study of India and Guyana

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic affected educational systems all over the world, leading to shift from face-to-face teaching-learning to a system of emergency remote learning. There are many studies that have examined the impact of these developments on conventional education as well as open and distance learning (ODL) systems. The present study is a transnational study of learners engaged in professional development in ODL institutions of India and Guyana. The study investigates comparative learner experiences with respect to four dimensions namely, quality of technology, engagement with teachers, student-student dialogue, and education-work-life balance while studying through virtual mode including in a cross-border learning scenario.

The study is a descriptive survey using a mixed mode methodology. The sample comprised 60 learners from India and Guyana enrolled in the Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) programme offered by the Indira Gandhi National Open University, India. The findings revealed that there were commonalities among learners in India and Guyana. Learners found live counseling sessions more engaging and interactive. It was seen that social media played a positive role in connecting learners during the pandemic and helping them to form their own learning communities. Learners in both countries felt that the education-work-life balance was disturbed during the pandemic. However there was determination among all learners to complete their online professional development programmes.

This study will contribute to leveraging learners' experiences for formulating future policy and designing practices for continuing professional development in developing countries for achieving SDG 4 for quality education.

*Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, online learning, open and distance learning, professional development, transnational education*

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all. Target 4.c acknowledges that there is a need to increase the supply of qualified teachers including through international cooperation of teacher training in developing countries so that teachers and educators are empowered and professionally qualified to promote quality education. (UN, 2020) However, in 2020, following the onset of Covid-19, there was a shutdown of almost all education institutions including those engaged in professional development and lifelong learning activities. According to UNESCO (2021), Covid-19 resulted in the education of more than 220 million tertiary students being suddenly disrupted in 2020. During the period of lockdown, the traditional face to face teaching was replaced by online learning, and even in the post pandemic period, the blended learning mode has been adopted by many institutions. One of the outcomes of the pandemic has been that while it led to a decline in enrollment of international students in on-campus programmes, yet it led to increase in students and providers of transnational education (Alam, 2022). The Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention (2007) defined transnational education as "All types and modes of delivery of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (CoE/UNESCO,2007, Sec.1, Terminology). Transnational education has been called "a logical outgrowth of online and distance education programs" (Banner, 2016, p. 80).

The present study is a transnational study that focuses on IGNOU's professional development programme, Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE), which is aimed at enhancing knowledge and skills of potential as well as existing distance teachers. The programme is offered in India as well as in Guyana under an MOU between Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) under the aegis of the Government of Guyana. The growth of transnational education has been supported by economic, political, cultural and educational rationales (Bosire & Amimo, 2017, p. 143.) In the

case of India and Guyana, both countries share a historical bond, which is strengthened by close ties of economic cooperation and cultural exchange. This research is significant as it deals with online continuing professional development and examines the dimensions of quality of technology, engagement with teachers, student-student dialogue, and education-work-life balance, as also pedagogical and technological challenges related to conduct of Distance and Online programmes in developing countries. The outcomes of this comparative research would act as a pointer for further planning and conduct of similar professional development programmes.

### **Conceptual framework**

There are many studies that have examined the impact of the pandemic on learners and their learning. Saavedra (2020) expressed concern on the effect of the pandemic on learning outcomes as most countries have very unequal education systems. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) point out that there could be no 'one size fits all' approach, and state that variables such as target group, age range, technological infrastructure, and social and economic context would need to be considered for different contexts. The OECD report (2020) on impact of COVID-19 on education highlights the inadequacies and inequities in the education system especially in terms of access to technology and supportive learning environment, and misalignment between resources and needs. There is therefore a need to compare the experiences of PGDDE learners of India and Guyana in this professional development programme so that a common understanding can be arrived at for future policy planning and management of such programmes, and in doing so, SDG Target 4 c. may also be addressed.

### **Literature review**

The pandemic was responsible for disrupting the lives of students in different ways (Daniel, 2020). The delivery of education at all levels changed overnight due to shift to online learning. The issue of engagement with teachers as well as dialogue with learners and between learners has always been an area of research. According to Holmberg (1983), education is based on communication between 'educans and educandus' as well as on peer-group interaction. Holmberg's theory of guided didactic conversation emphasizes the importance of personalized communication between teachers and learners as well as peer group interaction for learning to take place. Moore (2018) in his theory of transactional distance identified the significant role played by 'dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy' in deciding the 'distance' in the learning relationship between teachers and learners. Increased dialogue, flexibility and autonomy reduces the transactional distance, and therefore engagement between teachers and learners is key to learning. However, a comparative analysis of students in transnational programmes revealed that students may face pedagogical difficulties due to different teaching-learning approaches and practices between countries (Bosire & Amimo, 2017, p. 148.)

The need for development and implementation of accessible and appropriate technology-enabled learning policies/strategies has been emphasized for overcoming the pandemic crises (COL,2020). However, technology came with its own challenges. A study on e-readiness amongst school children in India by Bhaumik and Priyadarshni (2020) revealed that breakdown of devices and the inability for their repair during the pandemic lockdown was a major challenge. Smyth *et al* (2012) found that accessibility of internet and technological resources had an effect upon students' capacity to effectively engage in online courses.

Professional development programmes, like others, were also affected as the pandemic lockdown changed the routine of both household and educational pattern of students, and their educational institutions. Adedoyin and Soykan(2020) noted heavy workload amongst faculty and students during the pandemic and the 'loads of emails' led to stress and may have resulted in mental health problems. Analyzing the Wonkhe/ Pearson research on student experience through and after Covid, Jackson (2020)) found that the management of interactions and online learning by universities resulted in increased anxiety and harmed the well-being of students.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study is a survey of learners of Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) offered by Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The study is a descriptive survey in which quantitative data was collected through a Google form, followed by qualitative analysis of open-ended responses. The sample was 60 learners who participated in the online academic counseling conducted by STRIDE. Though all the 60 were sent the online questionnaire, 54 responded, of which 26 were from India and 28 from Guyana. A five-point Likert scale

(questionnaire) containing 16 items was developed to examine four dimensions i.e., quality of technology, engagement with teachers, student-student dialogue, and education-work-life balance while studying through virtual mode. The analysis of data was done using SPSS through statistical techniques of Standard Deviation (SD) and 't' test. The qualitative data was also collected through discussion, interviews and narration.

## Analysis and Findings

The overall gender profile showed that the respondents comprised 32% males and 68% females. The average male: female enrollment ratio for PGDDE in India stands at 43:57, whereas the male: female enrollment ratio across all programmes in IGNOU is 54.6:45.3% (IGNOU, 2020).

The findings show that the majority of the respondents were teachers with 50% teaching at the school level and 22% being college/university teachers. There were also over 9% who were engaged in private tutoring and coaching. The other categories were those working in the corporate sector, NGOs, home and fulltime students. The academic counseling in both countries was conducted through Google Meet. A total of 42 online sessions were conducted for learners of Guyana, and 84 sessions for learners of India.

The findings across four dimensions of this study based on a 5-point Likert scale are indicated in Tables 1 to 4. The responses ranged from Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (UN), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD).

### Quality of technology

The results of the study showed that with respect to technology access and log in issues, there were significant differences between India and Guyana, as may be seen in Table 1. As regards additional expenditure for using a bigger data technology pack, it was seen that learners in India incurred additional expenditure for using online resources. The effectiveness of online learning experiences alongwith sufficient online interaction was confirmed by all learners. There was significant difference in respect of technical problems related to device/hardware/software causing disruption during the online learning as learners in both countries did face technical problems.

**Table 1: Quality of technology**

| Statements                                                                                                                                                        | Country | Details of Responses |    |    |    |   |       |       | 't' Value | Level of Sig.          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------|----|----|----|---|-------|-------|-----------|------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                   |         | SA                   | A  | U  | D  | S | Mean  | SD    |           |                        |
| I did not face any technology access / log in issues as quality of internet in my area is very good.                                                              | India   | 10                   | 9  | 3  | 4  | 0 | 2.038 | 1.07  | 2.418     | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                   | Guyana  | 6                    | 7  | 3  | 9  | 3 | 2.857 | 1.38  |           |                        |
| The online counselling sessions, uploading of scanned assignments, accessing web resources meant additional expenditure/budget as I had to buy a bigger data pack | India   | 5                    | 10 | 1  | 8  | 2 | 2.692 | 1.319 | 2.173     | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                   | Guyana  | 2                    | 7  | 1  | 12 | 6 | 3.464 | 1.290 |           |                        |
| Interaction and the quality of learning experiences can be very well maintained in online learning (even if there is no face-to-face contact).                    | India   | 8                    | 15 | 1  | 2  | 0 | 1.884 | .8161 | .580      | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                   | Guyana  | 10                   | 11 | 4  | 2  | 1 | 2.035 | 1.704 |           |                        |
| There were technical problems related to device /hardware/ software cause disruption in learning effectively in the online mode.                                  | India   | 9                    | 12 | 2  | 3  | 0 | 1.961 | .9583 | 1.183     | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                   | Guyana  | 4                    | 18 | 22 | 2  | 2 | 2.285 | 1.049 |           |                        |

## Engagement with teachers

As regards the dimensions of engagement with teachers as seen in Table 2, it was found that learners in both the countries were favourably inclined towards face-to-face learning as they felt that there was more engagement during face-to-face counseling. However, the learners also agreed that in the absence of face-to-face contact due to Covid-19, the level of interaction in the online sessions was of a high quality. There was very little difference on the issue of importance of ‘camera on’ teaching, and it is seen that for most learners such eye-to-eye contact did make the teaching more interactive. Even on the issue of recorded lectures, learners of both the countries found such recorded lectures as useful for retaining knowledge. However, Piemani and Kamalipour (2021) reported that majority of respondents found attending live online lectures being more helpful than watching pre-recorded lectures.

**Table 2: Engagement with teachers**

| Statements                                                                                                                                                                   | Country | Details of Responses |   |    |   |    |        |       |           |                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------|---|----|---|----|--------|-------|-----------|------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                              |         | SA                   | A | UD | D | SD | Mean   | SD    | 't' Value | Level of Sig.          |
| I find the level of engagement in face-to-face counselling session happens more than that in an online counselling session.                                                  | India   | 6                    | 9 | 5  | 6 | 0  | 2.423  | 1.101 | .358      | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                              | Guyana  | 6                    | 1 | 4  | 7 | 1  | 2.5357 | 1.20  |           |                        |
| I find recorded lectures or videos more helpful for retaining knowledge than live online sessions.                                                                           | India   | 5                    | 1 | 3  | 8 | 0  | 2.538  | 1.139 | .847      | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                              | Guyana  | 3                    | 1 | 4  | 8 | 1  | 2.714  | 1.117 |           |                        |
| Eye-to-eye contact and gestures through ‘camera on’ mode create a more personalized online learning experience.                                                              | India   | 9                    | 1 | 3  | 0 | 0  | 1.769  | .631  | 1.42      | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                              | Guyana  | 8                    | 1 | 1  | 5 | 0  | 2.107  | 1.030 |           |                        |
| In the absence of face-to-face contact during the Covid times, I found the involvement and interaction by teachers in online counselling very useful and qualitatively rich. | India   | 13                   | 9 | 1  | 3 | 0  | 1.769  | .9922 | .420      | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                              | Guyana  | 10                   | 1 | 1  | 0 | 0  | 1.678  | .5479 |           |                        |

## Student-student dialogue

The results as given in Table 3 show that the WhatsApp group became a means for connecting with teachers and peers. During discussions, many learners spoke about the importance of such social networks in reducing the sense of isolation and helping learners to build dialogue with each other and with the teachers. Learners in India informed that the teacher-led WhatsApp helped learners of the same geographical region to connect and form their own localized study groups. There is negligible significant difference on more guidance related to project work as well as for practical sessions for design and development of technological tools. The learners found the group work to be useful, and suggested that online group presentations should be an evaluated exercise. The relevance of feedback in improving performance and importance of live counseling sessions was noted by all learners.

**Table 3: Student-student dialogue**

| Statements                                                                                                                                                     | Country | Details of Responses |   |    |    |    |       |      |           |                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------|---|----|----|----|-------|------|-----------|------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                |         | SA                   | A | UD | DA | SD | Mean  | SD   | 't' Value | Level of Sig.          |
| The especially created WhatsApp group helped me to connect with my peers and makes me feel part of a learning community.                                       | India   | 11                   | 1 | 2  | 0  | 0  | 1.653 | .628 | 1.80      | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                | Guyana  | 9                    | 1 | 3  | 4  | 0  | 2.071 | 1.01 |           |                        |
| Online sessions need to have more participatory activities (like group assignments and small projects) so that stronger collaborative learning can take place. | India   | 13                   | 1 | 2  | 0  | 0  | 1.576 | .643 | .463      | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                | Guyana  | 15                   | 1 | 1  | 0  | 0  | 1.500 | .577 |           |                        |
| I would like regular teacher feedback on all student activities/assignments so that I can improve my performance.                                              | India   | 8                    | 1 | 2  | 0  | 0  | 1.769 | .587 | 1.344     | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                | Guyana  | 6                    | 1 | 1  | 3  | 0  | 2.035 | .838 |           |                        |
| I find it easy to initiate discussion online with peers through discussion forums/chat/messenger, etc.                                                         | India   | 3                    | 4 | 4  | 14 | 1  | 3.230 | 1.14 | 1.347     | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                                                                                | Guyana  | 3                    | 1 | 4  | 11 | 0  | 2.922 | 1.09 |           |                        |

**Education-work-family life balance**

It was seen that online counseling did disturb the work-family life balance for learners in both India and Guyana. The importance of the open distance learning system was underlined by learners. It was seen that there was no significant difference as learner autonomy and freedom to develop a personal timetable were given value by both groups of learners. Further enrolled learners were confident of completing the course, despite the education-work-life balance being disturbed, which shows the relevance of such professional development programmes. However, some students during interviews mentioned that there should be a support forum for students dealing with depression, while others felt that the work load and time bound submission of assignments caused anxiety. One learner suggested that the online classes need to be conducted during the week instead of weekends as this took away from family time, chores, and other activities.

**Table 4: Education-work-family life balance**

| Statements                                                                                             | Country | Details of Responses |    |    |   |    |       |      |           |                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------|----|----|---|----|-------|------|-----------|------------------------|
|                                                                                                        |         | SA                   | A  | UD | D | SD | Mean  | SD   | 't' Value | Level of Sig.          |
| Online counselling has disturbed my work-family life balance as I am studying and working online 24x7. | India   | 17                   | 8  | 1  | 0 | 0  | 1.384 | .571 | 1.35      | Sig. at 0.01 level     |
|                                                                                                        | Guyana  | 13                   | 13 | 2  | 0 | 0  | 1.607 | .628 |           |                        |
| I value the flexibilities of the open, distance and online learning                                    | India   | 18                   | 7  | 1  | 0 | 0  | 1.346 | .561 | .627      | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |        |    |    |   |   |   |       |      |      |                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----|----|---|---|---|-------|------|------|------------------------|
| system which gives me autonomy to plan my learning according to my personal time table                                                                                                                          | Guyana | 19 | 6  | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1.464 | .792 |      |                        |
| I am confident that I will successfully complete my professional development program and not drop out of this program                                                                                           | India  | 17 | 9  | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1.346 | .485 | .720 | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Guyana | 17 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1.464 | .692 |      |                        |
| In spite of both study and family workload, I believe that this online learning gives me a better opportunity to enrol in reputed national/ international programmes for building my professional competencies. | India  | 17 | 9  | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1.346 | .485 | .720 | Not Sig. at 0.01 level |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Guyana | 17 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1.464 | .692 |      |                        |

## Discussion

The findings relating to the role of teacher in engagement are supported by other studies. Arbaugh (2010) noted the two different roles of the online teacher, i.e. a formal role demonstrating teaching presence, and an informal role showing immediacy behaviors, which were both responsible for positive learning and satisfaction in online programmes. Bhaumik and Priyadarshini (2021) found that 98% of the learners benefitted from the teacher-led WhatsApp group which were more of an informal way of communication with learners, and 70% did not feel any disruption in their ODL education during the pandemic. The caring identity of the teacher led Jones and Kessler (2020) to conclude that Covid-19 and the emergency transition to virtual learning resulted in teachers' personal and professional lives becoming 'fully integrated'. This study's findings related to 'eye-to-eye contact in camera-on mode' creating a more personalized experience are supported by Piemani and Kamalipour (2021) in whose study over 62% learners felt that switched-on cameras were a helpful online learning experience. Despite all odds, it is seen that learners desire to participate in projects and other collaborative exercises in the online mode. The importance of professional development did indeed resonate amongst the learners. As one of the learners said "that day is not far when our farmers in rural areas will be studying for a Masters Degree in Distance Education through an App on their phones which would teach them and other farmers better farming practices such as vertical farming etc."

This study underscores the inherent resilience of ODL institutions at a time of educational disruption due to the pandemic. It suggests that online learning (with some blended learning if needed) should be the path forward for conducting educational / professional programmes in order to address issues of access, equity, inclusion along with financial sustainability.

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