Supporting learners in distance and online learning: lessons for educators

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Esteemed Professor Nripendra Narayan Sarma, Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Arupjyoti Choudhury, Registrar of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Dr. Abhijit Bhuyan, Convenor of the 16th Foundation Day Celebration Committee, and distinguished participants, I am thankful to the organisers for the invitation to deliver the foundation day lecture. For a young university, foundation day reminds all stakeholders about its mission and vision to provide "education beyond barriers." Named after the illustrious son of the soil and one of the great Indology scholars, the University is an inspiration and a beacon of light for the people of the North-East. I had the privilege of visiting the University and interacting with several faculty members and staff. Therefore, I have firsthand information about your passion and commitment to spreading quality higher education. Today, my topic is related to student support, and I have entitled it "Supporting learners in distance and online learning: lessons for educators."

I plan to provide the context in which distance and online education is delivered today, emphasise the importance of designing suitable learner support mechanisms, and how to monitor student support to provide quality services. I will end with some key lessons that open and distance learning systems could provide to conventional higher education and remind all of us in the open and distance learning field to rethink our learner support practice. I am convinced that distance and online learning can significantly improve learning outcomes.

Let me start with the Context. What are the key issues?

Higher education is essential for innovation and economic development. Most developed countries have a high gross enrollment ratio in higher education. In the National Education Policy 2020, the target has been set as 50% GER by 2035. In about 15 years, India wants almost to double the GER. So, what would be our growth rate per year? On average, if our growth rate is about 5%, we may achieve this target. That means almost 50 universities and 2000 colleges need to be added per year, keeping the population constant!

Currently, India is one of the largest higher education systems globally, with over 56 thousand institutions. In comparison, the United States has less than 5,000 degree-granting institutions.

In terms of the number of students, it is the second-largest system after China. The number of students in higher education in India is almost like that of the total population of Canada!

The cost of higher education in India is very high. An estimate by the Economist Intelligence Unit shows that a four-year degree costs about 500% of the average income.

A Government of India study in 2014 showed that students in India spend over 49.7 million US dollars on textbooks and supplies per year.

The quality of higher education is a significant concern. Low employability of graduates, poor quality of teaching, weak governance, insufficient funding, and complex regulatory norms continue to plague the sector. At the same time, there is a craze for international ranking without going into the core of the challenges. It is essential to realise that ranking is a business, and they compare apples and oranges. They do not reflect an accurate picture of the quality of education in the country.

The ranking of institutions to promote quality has several issues, such as rural vs. urban bias, availability of best teachers and students in a particular group of institutions, funding support for research and innovations. The ranking system also creates categories amongst institutions, leading to more disparity in academic credentials.

Quality is a continuous process, and a product of inputs and processes that happen in educational institutions. In this context, learner support needs to be seen not just in ODL institutions but in all types of educational enterprises.

India adopted a National Education Policy in 2020 that is forward-looking and focuses on using technology for teaching and learning to improve quality. While open universities do not find a place in the policy, it emphasizes multimodal and multidisciplinary higher education.

The policy has several solid recommendations for online and blended learning, including the digital divide and equity in access to technology.

The total number of Internet users in India is 45% of the population, while the world average is 59%. Household with Internet access at home is 65% worldwide, whereas, in India, it is about 24% (2018 data). Mobile subscription is much higher at 84%. What about the bandwidth?

Internet bandwidth has several bottlenecks before it reaches the consumer. However, the fixed bandwidth available to Indians on average is comparable with the global bandwidth available. Mobile data speed is almost half of the world average. So, while more people have access to mobile and smartphones, the bandwidth they get is not enough for teaching and learning.

A recent study at the University of Hyderabad corroborated this. 40% of students indicated unreliable connectivity, 30% were worried about the cost of data, and 18% indicated they could not access online classes.

The COVID-19 has put the students to mental health challenges. A European Union study indicates students had to face a heavy workload, 50% felt their performance had declined, there was inequitable access to tools and the internet, and students faced psychological and emotional well-being issues. Several Indian studies during the COVID-19 also indicated challenges for students in higher education. One study reported that 68.7 % of students had mild anxiety and 61 % had mild depression, while

another study reported that 28.7% had moderate to severe depression, and 51.5% had mild to severe anxiety.

So, the critical question for us is how to provide inclusive education for all that is based on the principles of equity, quality, and empathy? I believe open and distance learning can offer so much to the world of education to learn from, and this is my premise today for this presentation.

Designing learner support is deliberate practice. Either we do it, or we do not. It is often missing in conventional higher education but not in the open and distance learning systems.

First, we must understand distance and online learning. What we are witnessing during the current pandemic is not online learning. This is emergency remote teaching. I am afraid much of these experiences are now being attributed to online learning without appropriate evaluation and only based on anecdotal experiences. Online learning is a planned and deliberate approach to using networked technologies to design and deliver teaching and learning. For that matter, online learning is only a form of distance education.

Online learning covers both synchronous and asynchronous activities for both students and teachers. So, a Webinar is one aspect of online learning and not the entire experience.

According to Desmond Keegan, distance education is characterised by

1.   separation of teacher and learner in the learning process;
2.   influence of an educational organisation in the planning, designing, and delivering of learning resources and opportunities;
3.   use of technical media for delivery of learning content;
4.   provision of two-way communication between student and teacher, and student and students; and
5.   absence of regular learning groups.

It is in this context that learner support needs to be seen. For some, learner support comes out of the deficient student-teacher and student-student separation model in distance education. Therefore, distance education has adopted excellent learner support practices that are equally useful to conventional education systems.

What is learner support? According to Ormond Simpson, learner support can be categorised as academic and non-academic. One is a tutoring role, and the other is a counsellor role. Often in India, these roles are combined as "academic counsellor."

Mostly, the learner support system follows a three-tier model in India. The study centers are the nearest action points for the learner, and the headquarter is the most distant. Regional centres in between perform some roles of the headquarters and the study centres. With online technologies becoming ubiquitous, many of the activities performed in the three-tier model of learner support can be moved to the online world.

However, media and technology have always played a key role in distance education, especially learner support. Printed texts are used for study guides or programme guides to inform students. Some universities use the telephone to provide remedial learning support, while many use SMS to remind students about critical dates and responsibilities. Radio and television are used for tutoring, in addition to

the print material, for providing learner support. Nowadays, social media is also used to clarify doubts and interact with students.

The learner support system can be one-to-one or group-based. Mainly, when it comes to tutoring and content-based clarification, group-based learner support is best. The one-to-one support is used via telephone, chatbots, and online services to provide personalised support.

Learner support can be provided at three stages – pre-entry, during a course, and on completing a course. While pre-entry and end-of-course support is provided in many conventional institutions, support is limited during the course. The distance and online education provide support services throughout the course, 24X7. The National Institute of Open Schooling in India uses a call centre to provide learner support 24X7.

It is learner support that turns content in online distance education into an engaging course with interaction and practice.

Adequate learner support requires a range of skills and competencies. While subject knowledge is essential, tutors or academic counsellors need empathy, listening skills, and warmth to support the learners. Sometimes, it is not easy to empathise if you are not a distance learner. To provide practical support services, you must feel for the students and have a passion for helping them learn.

Earlier the thinking was students read the learning materials to succeed. Whereas the current thinking is that to succeed, the student needs to learn from the course materials and interact with students and tutors to succeed. Learner support plays a crucial role in student success.

If that is so, how do we monitor and evaluate learner support? How good are we at providing learner support?

Research shows that quality in the distance and online course is a function of systems quality, materials quality, and learner support quality. These three factors combined support student satisfaction and achievement.

From a service quality perspective, we must evaluate learner support using five criteria:

1. Reliability: e.g., ability to perform counselling sessions without cancellation
2. Responsiveness: Quick and timely delivery of services
3. Assurances: Ensuring trust in the systems and practices
4. Empathy: Personalised services with warmth
5. Tangibles: Welcoming environment, both in physical and online space, including the accessibility

Open and distance learning institutions use various tools to monitor support services provided. Some of these are (i) observation of counselling sessions; (ii) monitoring of functioning of study centres; (iii) tracking assignments submission and return; (iv) tracking material dispatch; (v) monitoring of evaluated assignments; (vi) student course experience surveys; (vii) learner dropout data.

Now, let me turn to the final part of my presentation. What are the lessons? What are the best practices that anyone can follow in higher education?

If you have distance and online courses, do not assume that if we build it, they will come. This is not going to happen. Institutions need to ensure that students access digital tools and appropriate bandwidth. If this is not, learners will not access your digital platforms. In a way, there has been a deficit in service during transitioning into online learning during COVID-19, as the common understanding of providing service was violated, and learners had no choice. Most of the time, institutions thought they had completed their duties, whereas they had not. No one challenged the deficiency in service as we were in a pandemic situation. This will not be acceptable in the future. Learners will seek more, and institutions will have to indicate who will access a course and the essential tools. Distance and online learning programmes always start with learners at the centre. ODL practitioners think about equity first in learning delivery? Do we play our role well?

With the use of and integration of ICTs into teaching and learning, technological-pedagogical-Content Knowledge is needed. Content expertise is not sufficient to deliver online and blended learning experiences. Teachers need to adapt to the new normal. An outstanding practice followed in distance education is providing tutor comments on assignments submitted by students as feedback. Clear written comments on the assignments help learners reflect on their learning and support the transmission of short-term memory to long-term memory.

ODL teachers always knew that the media suitably used can teach well and is not a poor substitute. A recent survey in the UK showed that 68% of students rated the quality of online digital learning as 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good', and 62% also rated the support they received for online learning equally highly.

There is an implicit assumption that learners today use technology effortlessly, and thus they have the skills to use technology for learning. There is no evidence of that. Students still need self-directed learning and digital education skills to engage in the technology-enabled learning environment. So, if you are planning to use technology or using technology, engage in preparing students to use ICTs for learning effectively. In fact, in ODL, it is common to provide orientation to learners in every course with ICTs that help students understand and navigate the course.

While higher education demands specific skills to succeed, education institutions can also reduce stress levels and provide counseling services. The counseling services provided by open universities, including their flexible regulations, help learners be less stressed to complete a course. The support structures available at a distance and online teaching intuitions could teach educators to provide similar facilities and flexible routes to learners in conventional universities.

Open and distance education institutions and other high education centres need to ask (i) Is there an adequate learner support system in place in your institution? (ii) Does your course integrate learner support? (iii) Do you have a benchmark for providing quality support? (iv) Do you know how the learner support you provide impacts learner success/progress? Or how effective is your learner support system? (v) Does your learner support system contribute to lowering dropout and thereby support financial sustainability?

I am sure you will revisit your practice of learner support in your institutional contexts.

Thank you for your attention.