

Major trends and issues in the field of distance education

S. R. Sheeja

Institute of Distance Education (IDE), University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram, India
sheejasunil99@gmail.com

Abstract

Distance learning has become an accepted and indispensable part of our educational system. Technological revolution and increasing need for skill up-gradation are the major reasons behind the unprecedented growth of distance education. Distance education brings knowledge to those types of learners who have not been served by traditional class room setting. Rapid developments in the field of ICT offer new opportunities for the design and delivery of education through the distance mode. In spite of all the potentials of distance learning, there are many critical issues which are yet to be resolved. Quality, cost effectiveness, assessment, lack of motivation, dropout rate etc. are some important issues in this field.

Keywords: Distance learning, ICT revolution, quality, cost effectiveness.

Major trends & issues in the field of distance learning

With the emergence of new knowledge-based and service-oriented economy, radical changes have occurred in work organization and skill requirements. New jobs demand higher levels of skills. One of the greatest challenges in the field of education is that higher levels of skills are required not only by the elite but also by the common man. Conventional stream of education is not capable of accommodating the entire student community. In this context, countries have to find out new alternative approaches which enhance access, quality, cost effectiveness and equity. Both developed and developing countries consider distance education as a new approach which is capable of providing knowledge to those learners who have not been served by the traditional class room setting. Distance learning has become an accepted and indispensable part of education in most of the countries. Planners and policy makers all over the world have realized the potential of open and distance mode of education. Revolutionary changes in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) also promoted the unprecedented growth of distance education. It provides students with best and up to date educational resources in addition to the traditional teaching methods. Distance education is an educational process in which all or most of the instructions are given by someone removed in space or time from the learner. Here, all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print. Today, technology is the principal means of communication in distance learning while teachers in conventional class rooms use technology as a supplement to their teaching. The key promise of distance learning is that it makes it possible for an individual to learn outside the boundaries of a traditional class room. Open and Distance Learning

offers more freedom of access and wider range of opportunities to the learner.

Advantages of distance learning

Some important advantages of distance learning are the following:

- enhances access to learning and training
- provides opportunity for updating, retraining and personal enrichment
- cost effectiveness of education
- better quality and variety of educational resources
- education can be combined with work
- learner centred approach with greater flexibility and choice of content
- education to all age groups
- extends geographical boundaries
- Speedy and efficient training to key and target groups
- education in new and multidisciplinary areas
- combines education with work and family life
- development of multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education
- learner can overcome social and cultural barriers and infrastructural constraints

Recent trends in distance learning

Technology has been the most important factor which influenced the recent trends in distance education. Growth of internet and other digital technologies have expanded the potential of distance learning in terms of access and quality. A new method of distance education viz. technology mediated distance education has emerged (Jane & Hackley, 1997). Internet provides a powerful distribution mechanism for distance learning with a global reach. Moreover, as ICT enhances interactivity, it is helpful in assessment, task-based activity and student support. More and more

educational institutions are getting connected to the emerging networks and new technologies are being incorporated in the curricula. In this changing global scenario, distance education has become complementary and under certain circumstances a substitute to -face- to- face education.

Developments in ICT have radical effects. Now, each student has enormous range of resources available free from limitations of time and space. With the expansion of internet facilities the cost of processing, storing and transmitting education declined and this has contributed to substantial changes in the perception, design, delivery and administration of distance education. The role of teachers is changing within the new learning environment. They are no longer considered as the talking head and the front of all knowledge but as a facilitator or manager of the learning process (Kimball *et al.*, 2003). They have to be technically competent in the new online environment. Now, teacher is a manager, planner, facilitator, participant, model and a guide. As a result of their changing role teachers have to come out of their comfort zones and this is one of the reasons for their reluctance to become involved in distance learning process. (Adrian, 2000). Recently high population countries like Brazil, China, India, Pakistan etc. have increased distance education component of their educational programmes substantially. Distance education exhibits a twofold development pattern. On the one side, numerous single mode universities have emerged to absorb large number of new learners. On the other side, many traditional universities have started offering their programmes through the distance mode. In this era of increasingly market oriented educational systems, conventional institutions are using some form of ODL as a means of extending their markets. Technological developments allow new paradigms of access and new delivery systems which are linked to new types of demand. Moreover, there is a clear trend towards internationalization. In addition to economic and political driving forces, developments in ICT also enhance the process of internationalization of distance education.

Cost structures in open and distance learning are quite different from cost structures in conventional types of education. In the field of distance education, capital investment substitute for high recurrent costs making economies of scale a decisive factor. Large distance learning programmes can produce graduates at a lower cost as compared to conventional institutions. The cost of ODL vary a great deal according to the use of learning material, media and technologies and the type of student support services provided.

Major issues in distance learning

Even though there has been an unprecedented expansion of distance learning, there are certain key issues in this field which are yet to be addressed.

Quality: Large enrolment is considered as the goal and an achievement of distance education. The question of quality is not given as much attention as it deserves. This kind of attitude actually deteriorates the quality of many distance education institutions. Maintaining high standards of the programmes is an important issue in this field. A systematic approach is needed in the design of courses and learning materials. Courses must be constantly revised and updated and learning objectives and outcomes must be clearly stated. Often, it is believed that technology itself will improve the quality of distance education. The real issue is not technology itself, but how it is used in the design and delivery of courses.

Dropout rates: Increase in the number of dropouts is a very serious problem experienced by most of the distance education institutions. Loss of student motivation due lack of face- to- face contact with teachers and peers is a great barrier to distance learning. This often results in high dropout rates unless there is regular support of peers and tutors. Providing support to students is extremely difficult in the distance learning process.

Assessment of students: In distance learning programme tutors do not have an opportunity to know the student and his communication style and presentation. This often raises the issue of reliability of the student's responses. The issue of assessment- i.e knowing whether the trainees have achieved the learning objectives is more difficult in situations where tutors and students seldom meet each other.

Student concerns: Because of the self directed nature of study distance learning is more appropriate for the people who already have high levels of education and access to information and equipment. Tolerance for uncertainty, need for autonomy, ability to be flexible etc. are some of the essential characteristics required by students who pursue distance education. Hardy and Boaz (1997) found that "compared to most face-to-face learning environments, distance learning requires students to be more focused, better time managers, and to be able to work independently and with group members".

Cost effectiveness: Cost of online courses is affected by how they are implemented: as an enhancement or as the primary teaching medium. If it is implemented as a primary teaching medium, it is more expensive. The startup costs, maintenance costs, and personnel costs should also be considered to arrive at a true cost for a distance-learning program. As technology is very expensive properly designed distance learning programmes are highly expensive.

Problems related to technology: Advancement in technology by itself does not lead to effective distance education. Instructors need to be trained to use distance learning technology. Often some sorts of problems arise also from the instructor's attitudes about using the



technology. Technicians have a great role in the instructional process. Equipment and hardware malfunctions can also pose a great threat to the effectiveness of distance learning. Frequent occurrence of such problems interrupts the entire learning environment.

Infrastructure: Distance learning requires sufficient infrastructural facilities to ensure that training material reaches the learner. Adequate telecommunication and internet facilities are required. Developing countries must aim at formulating new policies to tackle these challenges.

Conclusion

Most of the countries consider distance education as a new approach which enhances access, quality, cost effectiveness and equity. Distance mode of education offers the common man an opportunity to study regardless of geographic, socio-economic and other constraints. ICT revolution has expanded the scope of distance learning. Developments of technology allow new paradigms of access and new delivery systems. In spite of all the potentials of distance learning, there are many critical issues which are yet to be resolved. Quality, cost effectiveness, assessment, lack of motivation and dropout rate etc. are some burning issues in field of distance learning. The real challenge is the designing of cost-effective and educationally-effective methods of teaching. Increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes accentuate the need for comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future.

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