

Open Learning and Economic Empowerment: A Tracer Study of Professional Programmes of the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning, Dibrugarh University, Assam

Dr. Shrutidhara Mahanta

1. Introduction:

The demand for Education has become very high today and the conventional system of education is unable to provide education to a significant number of students due to its limited resources. To meet this need, many educational institutions have been offering various disciplinary, professional, technical and vocational programmes through Open and Distance mode of education. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a mode of education in which any one can access learning according to his/her need and aspiration. It is open as there is flexibility in admission regarding marks, age, educational background etc, and distance as learners are able to achieve a degree with minimal counselling sessions or classes. Due to its unique nature of separation of teacher and learner, absence of regular and scheduled classroom etc, it is also termed as “time free” and “space free” education.

The aim of education is not only to produce learned/knowledgeable person, it is rather a method making them self supportive and independent. In this regard, the importance of vocational, technical and professional education is very much appreciable as they facilitate learners to become self employed even if he/she does not acquire a job. These programmes include any programs that improve the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or behaviour of any person. They are crucial for economic empowerment. Economic empowerment is a phenomenon, which enables a person to earn for her/his livelihood, to gain some employment.

Directorate of Distance and Open Learning, Dibrugarh University (DODL, DU) was established in 2001, with a few disciplinary programmes and it introduced professional programmes from the academic session 2005-2006. The organizational structure of DODL, DU is almost at par with the norms for ODL laid down by the Distance Education Council (DEC), IGNOU (Mahanta, 2014). Like any other educational institution,

DODL, DU also can be judged by the employability of its former learners. Employability means the skills and abilities that allow a person to get initial employment, maintain her /his employment, or achieve higher status in employment.

Tracer study is a simple mean by which we can know whether the former learners of an Institution are employed or not. If most of the former learners get good placements, we may infer that the academic programmes of that Institution are advanced and in accordance with the needs of the society; otherwise there may be some need for modification. Thus, the relevance and significance of any academic programme of any institution can be reviewed by tracer studies. This also facilitates in monitoring the delivery of the programmes. In addition to that, many institutions use it as a marketing tool as well. In educational research, the tracer study is also called graduate or alumni survey since its target group is former learners.

The aims of this study are to observe and identify how far the Professional Programmes of DODL, DU are able to empower its learners economically. To achieve this purpose, relevance of the programmes, the employment and unemployment situation of the former learners and their perception are considered. Moreover, the present study tries to identify the general, professional and need based programmes to be offered by the Directorate to meet the manpower need or human resources of the society and present a number of suggestions towards enhancing competence of the learners of the Directorate.

2. Significance of the Study:

ODL system occupies an important position in the socio-economic development of a developing country like India by providing education to a large number of students; by reaching the unreached; by overcoming distance, gender, regional, geographical, cultural and socio-economic hurdles. It is a well-known fact that education, especially, Vocational and Professional education are investments; providing skilled human resources as output. Recently our country has given importance on such education that empowers individual economic status. Therefore, a discussion on the employability of the PG Diploma Programmes of the Directorate is need of the hour.

The employment status of the former learners of any institution can be identified through tracer studies. Besides, the ODL practitioners always have to face the issue of Quality. As in the ODL system, the learners

are separated from the teacher, the spontaneous communication and feedback is not possible in this system like in the traditional-conventional classroom situation. Therefore, it is necessary to monitor whether learner- teacher interaction is really facilitating the learning and teaching process or not. Tracer Studies occupies an important place in accessing quality in any educational institution. Millington (1997) made a study on “The Use of Tracer Studies for Enhancing Relevance and Marketability in Online and Distance Education” and found that Tracers’ studies of ODL graduates could provide the information needed to reform educational programmes to bring about the fit between the requirements of the employment world and study. Moreover, Millington found that ODL learners could perform competently in the job market.

Gaba (2009) made a study on “Distance Education and Human Resource Development: A Tracer Study of Vocational Educational Programme of IGNOU” and found that Open and Distance Education helped almost all the learners in changing the economic condition of their personal life. Thus, ODL helps its learners to become economically empowered. Moreover, tracer studies facilitate the Institute to modify its management and monitoring systems, and based on the findings efforts can be made to address the inadequacies (Umar, 2006). Similar findings were obtained by Millington (2008) whose studies revealed that tracer studies of an institution provide quantitative and systematic data on employment and career, the nature of employment and related competencies, and information on the professional orientation and experiences of its former students.

In their study, Latif and Bahroom, (2010), mentioned that for quality distance education, tracer study is an essential component as it can gather learners’ feedback directly. They also found that former learners were more benefited economically from their degree achieved through distance education. Kebedom (2010) made a tracer study on the “Sheba University College Graduates” and found that majority of Sheba University College graduates were government employee and hence they were economically empowered. However, their grade and capability were not compatible to each other. It was suggested there to introduce some new courses to overcome the mismatched. In addition to that, the success of learners can be advertised, as a marketing policy to recruit new students.

Lamoure (2002), mentioned in the IIEP Teaching Materials of UNESCO that a standard tracer study is made up of two phases; the

first is an impact study that seeks to determine whether graduates are satisfied with the study programmes which they have successfully gone through at university and the second is a career development study to determine the extent to which the programmes have helped them secure employment of their choice or advance in their careers. The present study focuses on the second aspect as in this study, employability of the former learners of DODL, DU are inquired.

3. Objectives:

The aim of the study is to assess the utility of Post-Graduate Diploma (PG Diploma) Programmes offered by DODL, DU in relation to the economic empowerment. In order to realize this, the following objectives are taken:

1. To identify the various PG Diploma programmes of the Directorate as well as their enrolment trend,
2. To study the reasons of joining the specific programme by the learners.
3. To identify the employability and competencies of former learners of PG Diploma programmes of the Directorate.
4. To examine their view regarding the education they have achieved from the Directorate and their occupational characteristics.
5. To examine the view of the counsellors regarding PG Diploma Programmes offered by the Directorate.
6. To identify new areas and programmes to be offered by the Directorate.

4. Research Methods:

The nature of the data collected in the present study demands the Descriptive Research methods and Case Study design.

Sample:

The total number of former learners of the PG Diploma Programmes of the DODL, DU is 1001 and 300 (approximately, 30%) former learners were selected following purposive sampling method for the study. Moreover, 32 academic counsellors, 20 coordinators and 10 staff from administration were randomly selected.

Tools:

As the present study is carried out particularly on DODL, DU, the investigator had to prepare all the tools herself and standardized them accordingly. The following tools were constructed and used in the present study:

- One structured questionnaire consisting around 25 items was prepared for the former learners of the Directorate.
- One semi-structured questionnaire consisting around 20 items was prepared for the counsellors of the Directorate.
- One semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for the staff members and coordinators of Study centres of DODL, DU.

5. Data Collection and Analysis:

The present study adopted a variety of data collection methods in order to answer the objectives of the study. Both primary and secondary sources were consulted. First, institutional documents and archival records like, Official Records, Files and Admission Registrars were reviewed in order to get a conceptual understanding about the nature of the former learners of DODL, DU. Moreover, Admission Registrars were reviewed to get the names, addresses and contact numbers of the former learners of DODL, DU. After that, interviews were conducted with institutional representatives to know about the former learners, their employability and relevance of the programmes in the present day context. Then questionnaires were administered to elicit information from the Former Learners and the Counsellors of the Directorate. Moreover, some data were also collected by direct and participant observation.

To collect data from the Former Learners of the Directorate, the investigator used different means. Some of the data were collected by post, whereas some of them were collected through e-mail in this category. However, most of the data were collected by telephonic conversation. The data from the counsellors were collected in the weekend counseling sessions. The investigator conducted interview personally with the officers and the employees of the DODL distance education programme since 2001. Data from coordinators were collected during Coordinators Meet, which was held in HQs of DODL.

Data collected through documents and primary sources were analyzed qualitatively. Data collected through questionnaires and interview schedule are analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

6. Findings:

A discussion on the employability of the PG Diploma Programmes of the Directorate is presented in the following heads:

- PG Diploma Programmes offered by DODL.
- The enrollment trend of various PG Diploma programmes of the Directorate.
- The employability and competencies of the former learners of the Directorate.
- Views of the learners regarding the education they have achieved from of the Directorate.
- Views of the Counsellors regarding the Programmes.
- Views of the Officials of the Directorate regarding the Programmes
- Views of the coordinators of the Study centres regarding the Programmes
- New areas and programmes that to be offered by the Directorate.

A detailed discussion is presented below:

PG Diploma Programmes offered by DODL, DU:

The PG Diploma programmes are academic qualification to be taken after a bachelor's degree. A wide variety of PG Diploma programmes are offered by various universities. Different programmes require different eligibility criteria. The Table-1 shows the various PG Diploma Programmes offered by the Directorate with Duration, Eligibility Criteria and Year of Launching.

Table 1: PG Diploma Programmes Offered by the DODL, DU

Post Graduate Diploma Programmes:	Duration		Eligibility	Year of Launching
	Min	Max		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mass Communication and Journalism (PGDJMC) • Marketing Management (PGDMM) • Computer Application (PGDCA) • Statistics (PGDS) (kept in abeyance at present) 	1 Year for all programmes	3 Years for all programmes	Graduates under Three Year Degree Course in any discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2007-2008 • 2005-2006 • 2010-2011 • 2005-2006

It is found that among the PG Diploma Programmes of the Directorate, PGDS and PGDMM programmes were introduced initially; and gradually PGDJMC and PGDCA programmes were introduced. PGDS programme is kept in abeyance. Both the PGDMM and PGDCA programmes are in semester system where as PGDJMC programme is in annual system. Moreover, Table-2 shows comparative statement of the method of Evaluation for these PG Diploma Programmes of DODL, DU with that of DEC guidelines (2012).

Table 2: Method of Evaluation for Each Programme

Programme	Continuous Evaluation	Weightage in overall assessment		Term and Evaluation	Weightage in overall assessment	
		DDEDU	DEC		DDEDU	DEC
PGDCA	Assignments / projects	30%	25% to 30%	Examination	70%	70%-75%
PGDMM	Assignments	25%	25% to 30%	Examination	75%	70%-75%
PGDJMC	Assignments /Viva	20%	25% to 30%	Examination	80%	70%-75%

From the above list, it can be stated that in case of the programmes PGDCA and PGDMM, DODL, DU fulfils all the requirements laid down by the DEC regarding the weight-age of formative assessment in the overall

assessment for each programme, whereas in the programme PGDJMC the required weight-age was not fulfilled.

The Enrollment Trend of various PG Diploma Programmes of DODL, DU:

The efficiency of any programme can be well judged through its enrollment trends. Studying such trends has the ability to provide a clear-cut picture regarding the relevance and employability of that programme. This necessitates the study of the enrolment trend of PG Diploma programmes of DODL, DU.

The following table (Table-3) vis-à-vis the graph shows the trends of student enrolment in the various PG Diploma programmes of DODL, DU.

Table 3: Enrollment Trend of PG Diploma Programmes of DODL, DU

Years	Programmes				Total
	PGDMM	PGDS	PGDJMC	PGDCA	
2015-2016	13	-	16	247	276
2014-2015	18	-	16	253	287
2013-2014	15	-	32	257	304
2012-2013	18	-	26	84	81
2011-2012	06	-	17	40	63
2010-2011	05	-	17	43	65
2009-2010	16	-	34	-	50
2008-2009	25	-	34	-	59
2007-2008	21	-	27	-	48
2006-2007	23	1	-	-	24
2005-2006	19	1	-	-	20
Total	132	02	151	635	1001

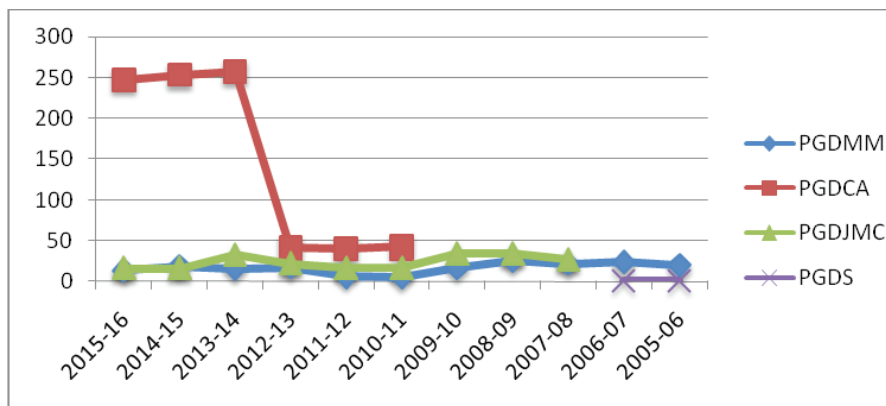


Fig I: Enrollment Trend of PG Diploma programmes of DODL, DU

From the above table and graph, it is found that among the PG Diploma programmes of DODL, DU, enrollment trend of PGDCA programme is highly appreciable. Enrollment in PGDJMC programme is almost constant with few downs. Although the programme PGDMM was introduced in the early stage of the Directorate, it did not receive adequate enrollment. The poor enrollment trend of the programme PGDS, forced the Directorate to keep the programme in abeyance.

The Employability and Views of the Former Learners of the Directorate:

The data collected through the questionnaire for the former distance learners were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. This questionnaire was distributed among 300 learners, out of which 17 former distance learners did not reply, 24 of the returned questionnaires were incomplete and, therefore, discarded from the analysis. So finally, 259 questionnaires were considered for the study. The main findings have been described below:

- Most of the learners (67.6%) are male.
- 84.9% learners are unmarried where as 15.1 % are married.
- Most of the learners (69.1 %) belong to 20-25 age groups.
- Out of the total 259 learners, most of the learners (63.7%) were from urban area and rests of them were from rural background.
- The following figure (Fig-II) shows the percentage of learners regarding their reason for joining ODL.

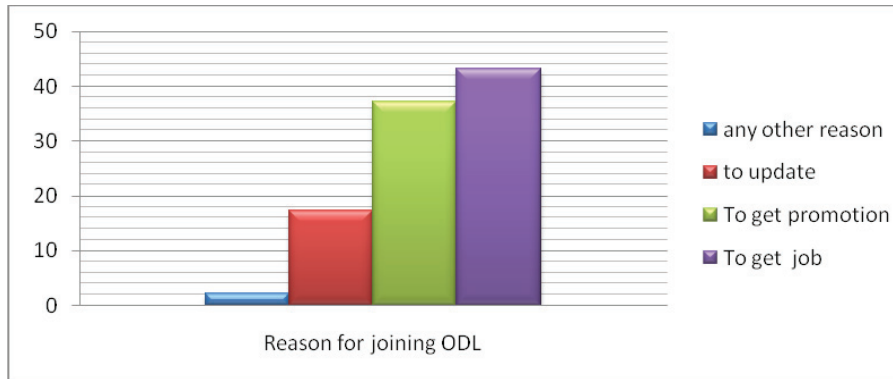


Fig II: Reason for joining ODL

Majority (43.2 %) of the learners opined that they joined DODL to get a job. A significant majority (37.1 %) opined that getting promotion as another reason whereas few (17.4 %) learners opined that they joined DODL to up-date and gain knowledge. A very few (2.3 %) questionnaire participant joined DODL for any other reason.

- The following figure (Fig-III) shows the percentage of employed former learners of the various PG Diploma Programmes of the Directorate.

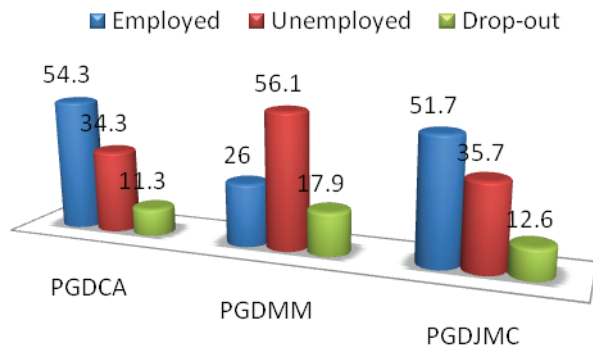


Fig III: Employability of the Former Learners

It was found that most (56.1 %) of the former learners of PGDMM programme were unemployed whereas majority of the former learners of PGDCA (54.3%) and PGDJMC (51.7 %) programmes were employed. It has been observed that among these three programmes, dropout rate is highest in PGDMM programme (17.9%).

- According to a significant number (54.8 %) of the questionnaire participant, PG Diploma Programmes of the Directorate helped them in getting job.
- 20.1 % of the learners opined that PG Diploma Programmes of the Directorate helped them in promotion.
- Few (7.3 %) of the respondents informed that they had already aware about the skills, and they enrolled to the programmes to get certificate only. All of them get employment.
- A significant number (43.6 %) of questionnaire participant opined that during study they did not get any scope to develop basic competencies like interpersonal skills, leadership skills, teamwork, written skills, oral communication etc.
- Most (53.3 %) of the respondents suggested that the number of practical classes organized by the Directorate were not sufficient.
- Most (86.1 %) of the former learners of the Directorate opined that delay in results hamper them in applying for job, as well as, getting jobs.

View of the Counsellors regarding the Programmes:

The data collected through the questionnaire for the counsellors were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. This questionnaire was distributed among 32 counsellors, out of which 29 questionnaires were returned. 4 of the returned questionnaires were incomplete and, therefore, discarded from the analysis. So finally, 25 questionnaires were considered for the study. The main findings have been described below:

- DODL do not have its own counselors for the programmes PGDJMC and PGDMM. It has to depend on the teachers of regular mode.
- All the counsellors of the PGDJMC programme opined that the syllabus and SLMs of PGDJMC programme are up-to-date; whereas according to 57 % of the counselors of PGDCA programme and 78 % of the counselors of PGDMM programme, syllabus and SLMs of their respective programme are not up-to-date.
- A significant number (68 %) of the counsellors opined that the contents of SLMs were not sufficient to get adequate knowledge on

the subject, whereas 28 % of the counsellors found them sufficient to get adequate knowledge on the subject; and rest did not provide any responses.

- According to a significant number (76 %) of counselors, all most 50 % of the learners are attentive and efficient.

Views of the coordinators of the Study Centres regarding the Programmes:

The followings points are revealed:

- PGDCA programme is highly demanding programmes among the learners.
- Arranging practical classes for the learners is the most challenging task for them.
- They did not have any idea about employability status of the former learners.

Views of the Officials of the Directorate regarding the Programmes:

The followings points are revealed from the interview schedules constructed for the Director, Assistant Registrars, Programme Coordinators, and Employees of the DODL, DU.

- Officials were unaware of the fact that tracer studies also make an important contribution to the quality assurance of the system.
- Lack of motivation, responsibility and awareness of the distance learners towards the ODL system hamper the growth of the system; learners are unable to use the various Learner Support Services (LSS) provided by the Directorate due to ignorance. This led to poor performance in the evaluation process and student attrition.
- Attitude of the people towards ODL also hampers the employability of the former learners a lot. The views of general people, the parents and students of conventional system; even the counselors, employees and the learners of ODL system reflect the negligence, unenthusiastic approach regarding ODL.

7. Discussions and Suggestions:

It has been found that during the study, DODL, DU offers only three Post-Graduate professional programmes among which PGDCA and has an appreciable enrolment growth. Most of the learners joined ODL to

enhance their existing skills as well as to learn new skills. They were not knowledge oriented but job oriented. Therefore, DODL should lay more emphasis on need-based vocational and professional programmes. It was also found that DODL helped majority of the former learners to become economically empowered. Similar findings can be seen in Gaba (2001), where one finds that ODL programmes bring changes economically in the learner's personal life.

The present study also found that some learners were dissatisfied regarding quantity of practical classes; some were with the receiving the material in time and some were with the delay in results. These affected them in successful completion of their respective programmes. This may happen due to the typical nature of distance learners like broad demographical, geographical and situational differences. DODL, DU should take care of these aspects. More counselling (pre, during and post) is needed to increase the motivation, responsibility and awareness of the distance learners regarding the support provided by the Directorate. This may reduce the problem of student attrition as well as unemployment.

In this study, it was found that 67.6 % of the former distance learners are male learners. However, Mahanta (2014) found that 73.8% of the learners of DODL are females. Therefore, it may be inferred that existing professional programmes are unable to attract female learners. DODL, DU may introduce some professional courses which are popular among the female learners like B.Ed., Fashion Designing, Courses on Public Relation ,Interior Decoration to name a few.

Similarly, Mahanta (2014) found that most of the learners of DODL, DU are from rural background, but present study shows that most of them are from urban locality. Thus, it may be inferred that learners from urban locality prefer professional programmes.

Some personality development skills like interpersonal skills, leadership quality, teamwork, oral communication etc., are very much essential in the job market. It was found that the PG Diploma programmes of the Directorate lacked inculcation of these components in the curriculum (syllabus, SLMs and activities); hence, the curriculum should be modified so that the learners get opportunity to practice them during study. Moreover, it was found that enrollment trend as well as employability of PGDMM programme is very poor. Thus, we may infer that due to outdated course content, learners were unable to get job and hence this programme unable to attract more learners.

DODL should take some steps for all round developments of the learners. These may be achieved through organizing seminars and presentations during the weekend counselling sessions. It will increase the self-confidence, self-esteem and presentation skill of the learners. It also reduces the lowliness (inferiority) feeling of the learners and they will be able to face interviews confidently. The Directorate should establish a cell for providing guidance regarding career counselling or providing information about future prospects of the programmes may help the learners up to great extent.

The use of ICT may help the learners to get optimum benefits from these programmes. Moreover, DODL should launch skill based on-line courses, courses under SWAYAM to attract more learners and reach nook and corner of the Globe following the recent directives of the MHRD, Govt. of India to raise the percentage of students in Higher Education from 23% to 30%. DODL should open Industry driven courses that will help the students to get employment or provide them entrepreneurship skills to get absorbed to the Industries with whom the University has signed MOUs under its Industry- Academia collaboration initiatives. Moreover, some in-service skill-training programme should be explored for the employees of nearby industries.

Some specific steps like involvement of the regular mode students in the certificate courses of short duration, involvement of the regular faculties in various occasions other than counselling may be taken by the Directorate to change the mind-set of the general people as well as the learner towards ODL system. In addition to that, cooperation and dialogues among the Directorate, Study centres and the regular Departments of the University will help in the growth of the system as well as decrease the negative attitude of the general people towards the ODL system.

8. Conclusions:

The results of the proposed study are expected to help the ODL institutions in general and the Directorate of Distance and Open Learning, Dibrugarh University in particular in many ways. Even if, it is a limited study, based on the results of this study the academic and administrative aspects of the Directorate can be reviewed and enhanced. This would help administrator of the Directorate for a better understanding of the need of the learners and preparing future planning and their executions.

References:

- Gaba, A. K. (1999). "Distance Education and Job Market: A case study of IGNOU Graduates" *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, 8 (3), pp 225-263.
- Gaba, A. K. (2001). "Distance Education and Human Resource Development: A Tracer Study of Vocational Educational Programme of IGNOU". Retrieved July 07, 2015. <https://www.researchgate.net>.
- Kebedom, Negus. (2010). Sheba University College Graduates': Tracer Study. [Retrieved July 07, 2015, 2013 from <http://www.suc.edu.et/TracerStudy.html>]
- Lamoure, Jean. (2002). Follow-up and Tracer studies, IIEP TEACHING MATERIALS UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning. [Retrieved August 26, 2014 from <http://www.unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001t203/120340eo.pdf>]
- Latif and Bahroom. (2010). OUM's Tracer Study: A Testimony to a Quality Open and Distance Education, *ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 2 No. 1. [Retrieved August 26, 2014 from <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol20-issue5/Version-4/K020547075.pdf>]
- Mahanta. (2014). "An Analytical Study of Learner Support Services provided by Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University" Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Department of Education, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh.
- Millington, Claire. (2008). The Use of Tracer Studies for Enhancing Relevance and Marketability in Online and Distance Education, Barbados Community College. [Retrieved August 26, 2014 from https://www.wikieducator.org/images/e/e1/PID_424pdf]
- Muchena et.al. (2015). Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) graduates and the job market: A Case Study on the Employability of ZOU Media Graduates (Harare Regional Centre), *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Volume 20, Issue 5, Ver. IV, PP 70-75. [Retrieved Feb 10, 2015 from <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol20-issue5/Version-4/K020547075.pdf>]
- Umar, Abdurrahman. (2006). "Assurance Procedures in Teacher Education: The case of the National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna, Nigeria" in *Perspectives on Distance Education: Toward a Culture of Quality* eds. Badir K. Koul & Asha Kanwar. Commonwealth of Learning. [Retrieved February 10, 2015 from <http://www.col.org/colweb>]

Web Resources:

- <http://www.DODL.DU.org>
<http://www.ignou.ac.in>