

# Exploration of Educational Enhancement and Reflective Observation on Distance Education System through NSOU

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## 1. Introduction:

Distance Education plays a dynamic role to 'reach the unreached' as a relatively new method of educating the society. Over the years, distance education has attracted learners from various socio-economic backgrounds. The important point to be noted that distance education have enabled students who had to leave their education at an early age for personal or economic reasons. Taking into account the fact, that it is impossible for the adult learners, rural women and youths from remote localities to enroll themselves in regular universities hence; in this context, distance education comes into the play. Professor S.K. Panneer Selvam (Selvam, 2012) has distinguished Distance Education from the traditional education on three basic grounds:

- Learner Centeredness (Learner Autonomy)
- Indirect Education (Non-formal Learning)
- Education in real-life setting (Through experience)

These distinctive features have made universal, lifelong learning possible for many learners with unconventional background. However, many first generation learners enroll themselves in distance education, which makes it a matter of discussion. The first generation learners have been deprived of financial or family support and had to leave education at the elementary level, henceforth, they are able to enroll themselves in distance education as it not only enables them to make a fresh beginning but also provides them flexible learning opportunities that makes education much more feasible.

## 2. Objectives:

The present study concentrates on the following objectives:

- To analyze the socio-economic background of the learners of PG Geography.

- To observe the demographic features of the PG Geography learners.
- To highlight the location of the learners as it signifies the eagerness of the learners.
- To identify the streams and related issues of the enrolled learners in the said courses.
- To find out the issues and challenges related to the subject in NSOU.
- To identify the extending geographical access to education as reflective observation.

### **3. Methodology:**

The present study makes use of both primary and secondary data. The primary data is collected through the proper questionnaire schedule following the purposive random sampling. The secondary data has been collected from the registrar department of NSOU. The present study is concentrated particularly on the postgraduate (PG) learners of geography of NSOU.

### **4. Background of NSOU:**

The increasing rate of population growth and its pressure, as well as, forthcoming effect make the existing conventional education system very difficult to provide higher education to all. Therefore, the learner's demands and requirements have been changed which produce a changing environment for education. Henceforth, to fulfill the increasing demand of education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system is arising in a popular way of solution and almost 25 per cent of the total enrolment in higher education have a wide access to varying courses through the open and distance mode. During the last twenty years, ODL has enhanced its affordability and flexibility to common people. Moreover, due to its inbuilt learner friendly features and flexibilities, the ODL system has the potential to enable the learners to deal with the challenging and difficult situations of society.

There is a need to bring changes in the existing system where the learning time, learning style, and the pace of learning, and the evaluation system is such that it does not create any pressure and stress on the learners. In such a circumstance, Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) is now being able to fulfil its objective of '*reaching the unreached*' and

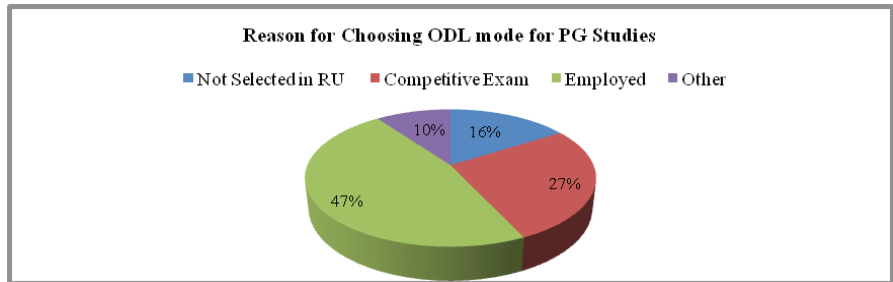
is becoming a premier university with a record number of students enrolled in different programmes. In comparison to the other major and renowned Universities of West Bengal, NSOU has vividly experienced the huge and increasing strengths of the changing learners who are creating a new learning environment. While Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University is the first state Open University, established in 1982 in India, in West Bengal, Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) was established in 1997 as the only State Open University. From the beginning of its journey since 1997, NSOU has emerged as one of the largest state open universities in India. In 2006, the NSOU received the prestigious International Award “*Excellence in Distance Education Award*” (EDEA) for institutional excellence from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada.

### **1.1 Academic Programmes of Science Subjects at NSOU:**

The School of Sciences is a very energetic and vibrant part of the University ever shouldering the academic talks and activities. Within the limited resources, it never compromises with the eminence of teaching and accepts the modern technology to transfer the same to the students. Six UG courses in Botany, Chemistry, Geography, Mathematics, Physics and Zoology and three PG courses in Mathematics, Zoology and Geography are being offered to the learners by the School of Sciences of NSOU. The number of PG Study Centres for Mathematics is widely spread all over West Bengal (84 centres) and Geography and Zoology has been increased to four for both the subjects with the 110 and 135 students’ intake capacity maintaining the quality.

Growth of PG students: The three PG courses of the University in science stream are Geography, Zoology and Mathematics. The University is willing to offer more PG courses in the other science subjects along with other streams in near future. People in the age group 25 - 30 years are seen to be more interested in pursuing PG studies. Most of the Learners are found to enroll in the PG courses cutting across income boundaries. The figure below (Fig.1) represents that the enrollments in Mathematics are huge in number and the proportion is far ahead than the other two PG science subjects, i.e. Zoology and Geography. The seats are limited for the Zoology and Geography in the PG courses.

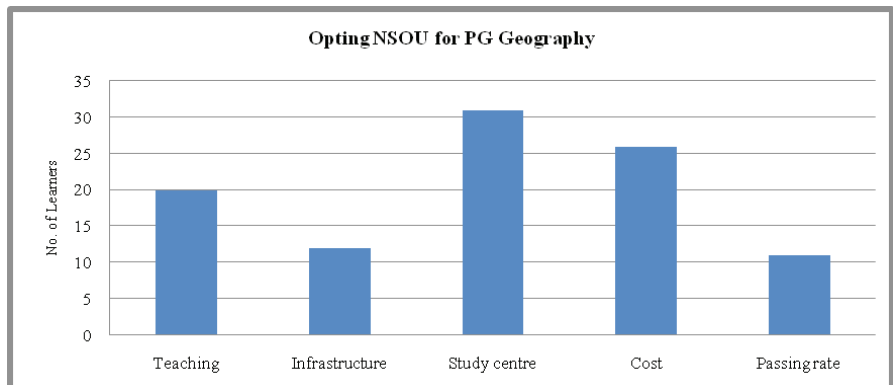
**Figure 1:** Reason for choosing ODL mode for PG Studies



**Data Source:** Primary Survey, May 2017

Most of the PG Geography students (47 %) are jobholders and some (27%) are willing to engage themselves in the competitive examinations. Another percentage of the learners (16%) had come to NSOU, as they were not selected in regular university.

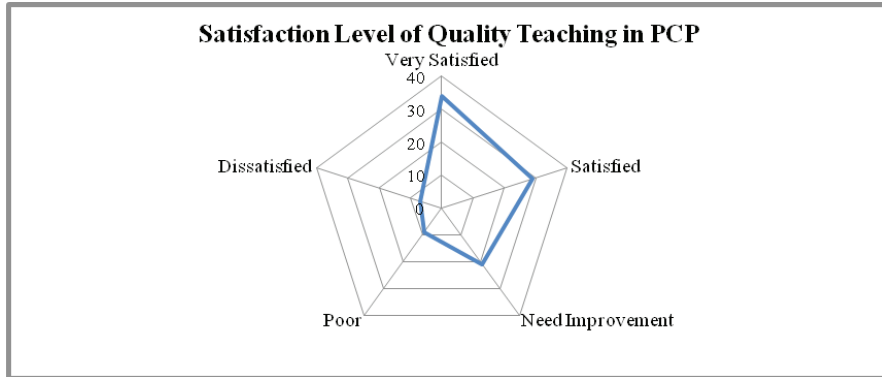
**Fig 2: Option of learners for PG Geography**



**Data Source:** Primary Survey, May 2017

Most of the learners of PG Geography are opting NSOU (Fig. 2) as the study centers are close to their residences and are cost effective. Some are interested for the infrastructural base and passing rate of NSOU. Some of them have heard about the PCP and teaching quality and are eager to enroll at NSOU for their PG course.

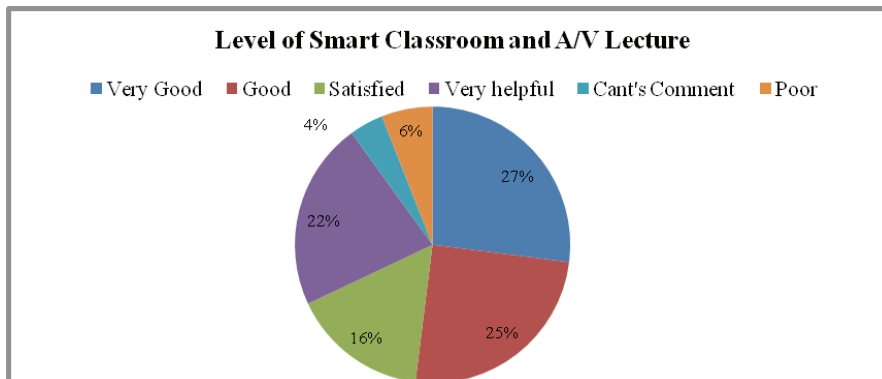
**Fig 3: Satisfaction Level of Personal Contact Programme (PCP)**



**Data Source:** Primary Survey, May 2017

Most of PG Geography learners are very much satisfied about the overall experience regarding quality teaching through Personal Contact Programme (PCP) in NSOU (Fig. 3). The proportion of poor and dissatisfied learners is very few in number.

**Fig 4: Satisfaction Level of Smart Classroom and A/V Lecture**



**Data Source:** Primary Survey, May 2017

Moreover, most of the learners are very much satisfied (16%) and happy with the smart classroom facilities provided to them during their theory and practical classes (Fig. 4). They believe that the infrastructural facilities of the smart classroom and the lectures along with the Audio-Video (A/V) lectures are very much updated and good (almost 52%) and these provide them the ICT support from the NSOU to enrich the horizon of their knowledge.

Establishment of Remote Sensing and GIS Laboratory: The modern world is very much advanced in terms of technological development and Remote Sensing (RS) and the Geographical Information System (GIS) is able to create a new dimension in the multifaceted aspects of development. In the School of Sciences, the premises with the facilities of RS and GIS as compulsory syllabi in the PG courses are located at Salt Lake City of Kolkata and Academic Campus at Kalyani, Nadia. A RS and GIS Laboratory have been established to facilitate PG students' practical curriculum as a state of the art faculty at the academic campus. *Geometica* and *MapInfo*, as a high end Remote Sensing and GIS based software have been installed in this computer laboratory. All the computers have been networked to share digital data and software facility along with the smart classrooms.

Ph.D. Courses: A large number of Ph.D. students are enrolled in different subjects in the University. Total number of registered Ph.D. in science subjects of the University is 68, among which most of them are awarded. Environmental Sciences have maximum number of scholars (39), followed by Geography (18), Mathematics (5), Computer Application (2), Zoology (2), Anthropology (1) and Statistics (1). The NSOU is going to introduce its Ph.D. courses in a more attractive and regular way as per the recent updated rules and regulations probably from 2018 academic session after getting due permission from the UGC in 2017.

## **1.2 Major Conveniences and Advantages of NSOU:**

- The NSOU has been striving uninterruptedly by providing educational opportunities to the learners particularly to the backward and weaker sections of the society, by promoting wider access to higher education.
- It also provides quality education at the doorsteps of the common people.
- It enhances equal opportunities for higher education, including those who are in service, women, and adults.
- It continuously engages learners in conventional, as well as, skill-specific courses.
- The learners of both UG and PG are growing in numbers particularly in science subjects at NSOU.

- NSOU plays a very significant role in providing quality education with its strategic mission of empowering rural West Bengal with greater vigour and purpose.
- The study cost of NSOU is relatively cheaper and more economical.
- At NSOU, any number of students may enroll themselves (not in every course).
- Conducting examinations and publishing its result is an important and challenging issue for NSOU due to the huge enrolled numbers.
- Flexibility to add newer courses in learners' career.
- NSOU signifies the economies of large scale; greater number of enrollment makes it cheaper to operate distance education.
- Development of continuous study habits for lifelong learning.

## **5. Educational Enhancement and Reflective Observation at NSOU:**

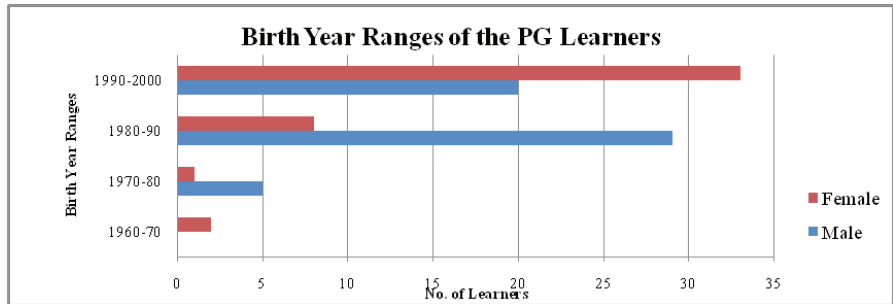
The present scenario of the multidisciplinary role of NSOU for PG (Post Graduate) Geography Learners' profile have been studied and analysed here to portray the educational enhancement and its reflective observations along with the impact on society.

### **Multi-disciplinary Role of NSOU:**

No age limits: Although, age is no bar for the higher education, mostly the young students from the rural and urban areas particularly in the age group of 22 to 40 years (found from the birth year) have enrolled themselves in the different academic programmes (mainstream and other non-conventional courses) of NSOU. From the graph (Fig. 5), it is clear that male and female learners of different age groups are enrolled in the PG geography courses of the University.

Most of the PG learners are also young as their birth year ranges mostly from 1990 to 2000. The female learner of this category is more in number than the males, and most aged learners are also female. The medium aged learners are mostly males. Most of them belong to the first generation of PG learners and therefore their surrounding environs have a strong impact by way of encouraging or motivating them to pursue their education via distance mode.

**Fig 5:** Range of age of the PG Male-Female Learners

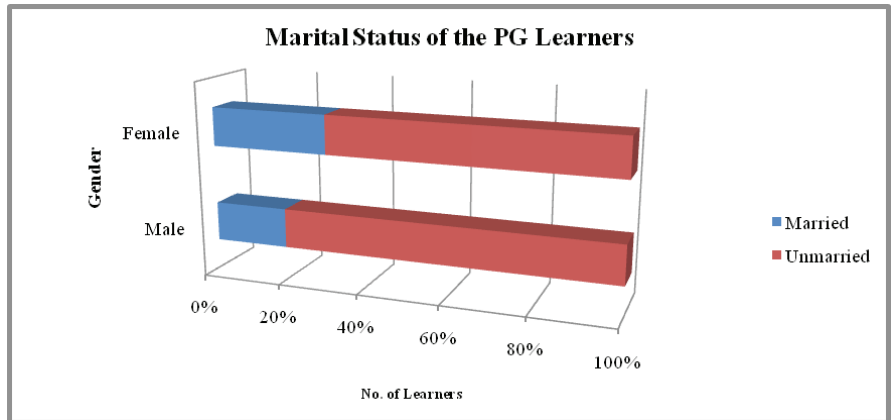


**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

**Marital Status:**

Sometimes, marriage creates a bar for the women to pursue higher education in West Bengal. Among the learners of NSOU, married women are more involved than the married men in the field of education. Married and unmarried male and female learners are simultaneously continuing their higher education at NSOU (Fig.6).

**Figure 6:** Gender-wise Marital Status of the PG Learners



**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

This graph (Fig 6) is also very significant because of the fact that maximum learners are unmarried which means they are young and want to complete their education. Moreover, the married male and female learners are continuing their education through the NSOU after marriage. Most of the male learners are unmarried whereas; almost 30% female learners are married. After marriage, continuation of studies

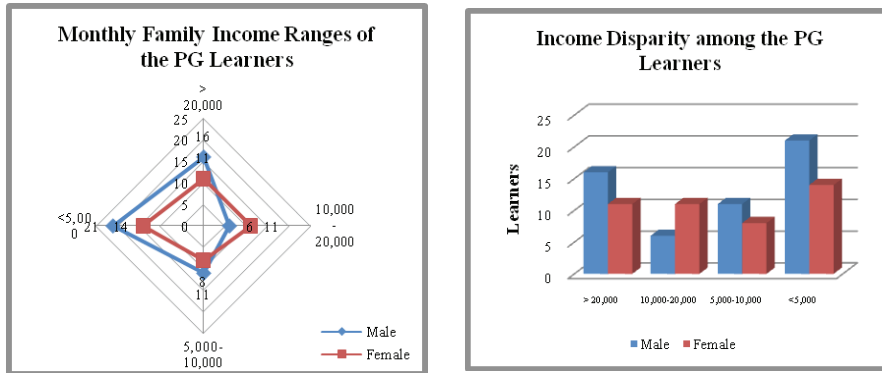


becomes quite difficult, particularly for female learners but they pursue the same.

**Income profile:**

Poor income level affects the learners for their higher education. The dimension of higher education was refined through the NSOU as the main motto of the University is to ‘reach to the unreached’ section of the society that is very appreciable in this regard. About 30 % of the people have monthly income below Rs. 5000/- (Fig.7). Most of the learners (almost 60%) come from financially poor family background as their monthly income comes to about 10,000 INR.

**Fig 7: Monthly Income Ranges of the PG Learners**      **Figure 8: Income Disparity among the PG Learners**



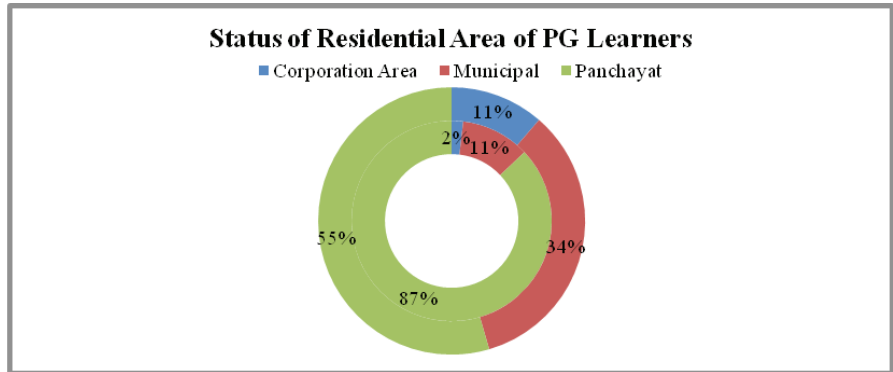
**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

The monthly income of the learner’s family shows a variety between males and females (Fig.8). The monthly income ranges of the male learners is from Rs. 10,000 to 20,000/-. Whereas, the monthly income ranges of the female learners is from Rs. <5,000, Rs. 5,000/- to 10,000/- and Rs. > 20,000. However, the male-female income disparity is not a factor to enroll themselves in the different PG courses of NSOU, as the total expenses of the courses are less than other universities of West Bengal.

Regional distribution: Rural areas of West Bengal are mostly benefitted from the NSOU. At present students from the rural areas, as well as, the urban areas are involved more in higher education because of the conventional and non-traditional system. However, the enrolment of the students of rural areas is more than the urban areas in NSOU.

About 70 per cent rural people from rural West Bengal get enrolled in NSOU (Fig.9). In case of PG learners, most of the males (87%) and females (55%) belong to Panchayat area. The females (34%) from the municipal area are more in proportion than the males (11%). The learners from the corporation area are very few in numbers.

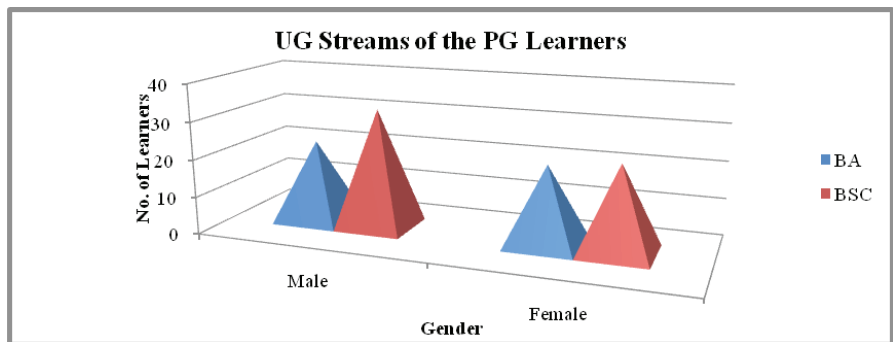
**Fig 9: Residential Area of the PG Learners**



**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

Some of the students who come from the weaker section of the society and who have not completed their higher studies in the so called conventional system, are facilitated by the university that provides scope for their n studies.

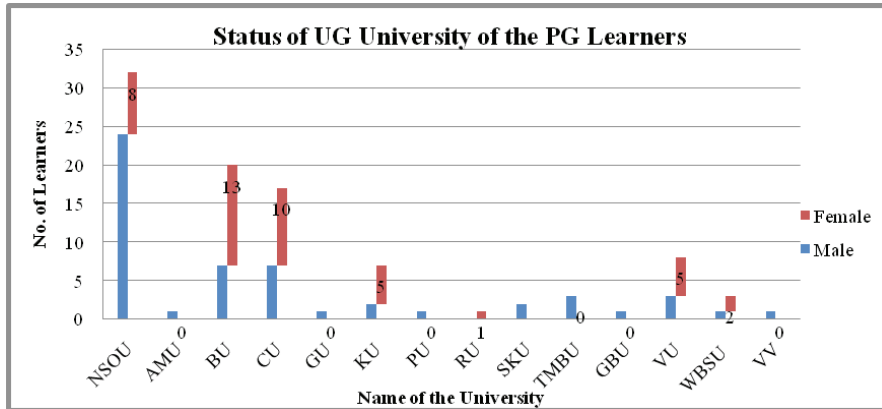
**Fig 10: Gender-wise Under Graduate Streams of the PG Learners**



**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

The above graph (Fig.10) shows that most of the enrolled PG male learners are from the BSc streams than BA in their UG courses. The female learners have both BA and BSc in their UG courses.

**Fig 11: Status of Under Graduate University of the PG Learners**

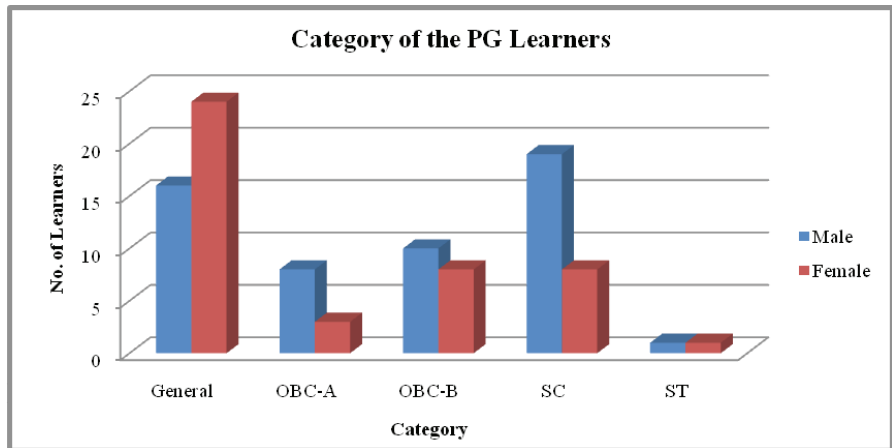


**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

Most of the male learners came from the Calcutta University (CU), Birdman University (BU) other than NSOU to enrol in the NSOU PG Geography course (Fig.11). Other notable UG University of the male learners are Vidyasagar University (VU), T.M Bhagalpur University (TMBU), Kalyani University (KU), Sidhu Kanhu Murmu University (SKMU), Gour Banga University (GBU) and West Bengal State University (WBSU). The female learners mostly come from BU and CU than NSOU. Female learners from KU, VU, WBSU, RU (Ranchi University) also came to enroll in NSOU PG geography course in 2016.

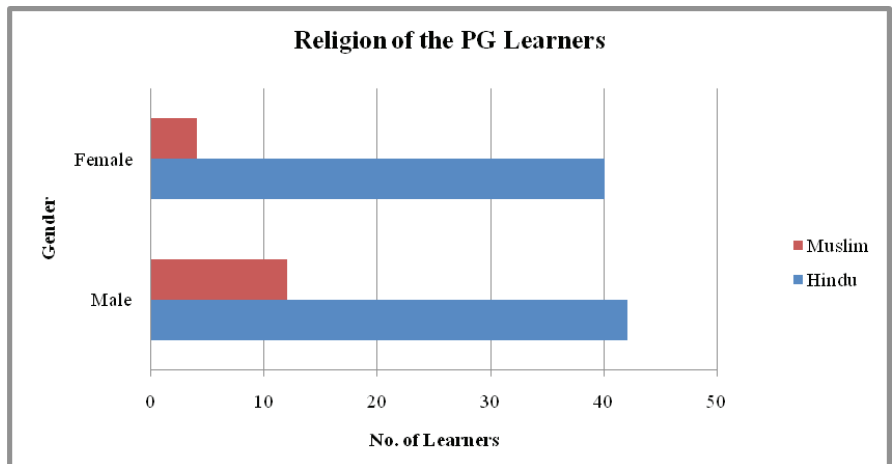
Gender Category: Rural poor, particularly women in spite of various hindrances regarding higher studies are able to engage in the ODL mode of education system through NSOU. Among those students or learners, general caste people, a good proportion of SC and OBC students are enrolled here (Fig.12). Most of the students particularly from the rural areas are often bound to travel long distances for their higher studies whereby travelling a distance of 2 km. to 30 km. is very common. More than 40 percent of the learners have their residence within a distance of 2 km. from their respective study centers. More than 10 percent of learners travel about 6 km. to the respective educational institutions. In case of PG learners of NSOU, the general category is followed by the SC learners. One aspect to be noted here is that, females of general category are more in number than the males of the same category. Again, OBC-B male and female learners are more in number than OBC-A.

**Fig 12:** Nature of Gender Category of the PG Learners



Religion Category: The learners engaged in PG Geography course of NSOU are mostly Hindu and Muslim by religion (Fig.13). Learners belonging to Hindu religion are more than those belonging to the Muslim community.

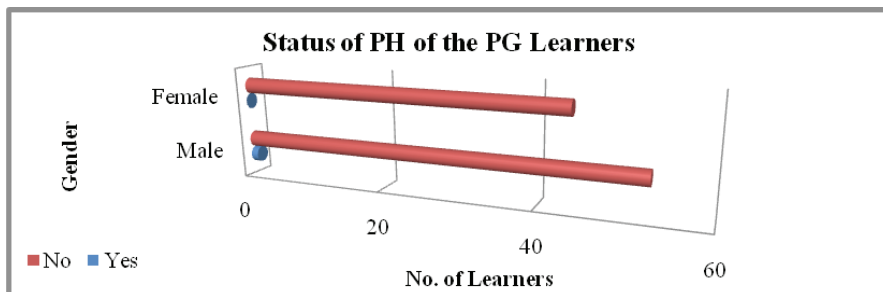
**Fig 13:** Gender-wise Religious Status of the PG Learners



**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

Status of Physically Handicapped Learners: The graph (Fig.14) represents that most of the PG learners of 2016 are not physically handicapped (PH). Moreover, among the overall PH candidates, PH male is more in number than females. This status is very significant as the postgraduate geography is course based on fieldwork. NSOU is able to handle all the categories of learners, which has a strong positive impact on the learner's and their society at large.

**Fig 14: Gender wise Status of PH of the PG Learners**

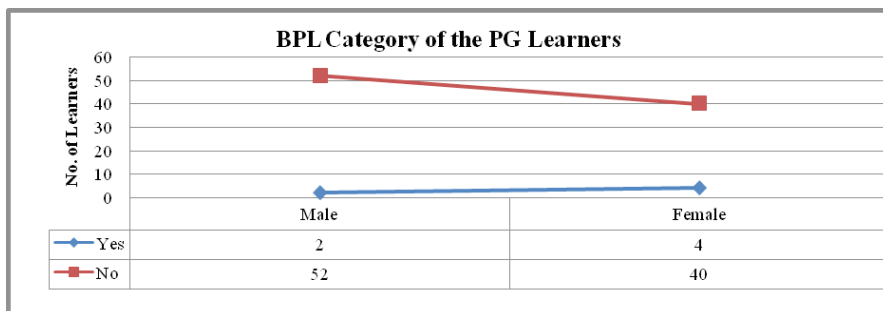


**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

**Status of BPL Learners:**

The BPL male and female learners are very few in number in case of PG Geography (Fig.15). BPL females are more in number than male whereas non-BPL males are more in proportion than female.

**Fig 15: Gender-wise Marital Status of the PG Learners in NSOU**



**Data Source:** Registrar, NSOU, 2017

**Orientation Programme:** Some orientation programmes are also organised by the School of Sciences of the University at regular intervals to confirm the better mutual understanding with their partner institutions.

**Interactive Radio Counselling Programme:** The NSOU also organises interactive radio counselling programme that is broadcast on Gyan-Vani F.M. Radio channel, Kolkata. Such kinds of programme help the learners to understand their respective subject matter along with some current topics. Most of the faculties are involved in delivering lectures on their respective subjects according to the syllabi of the NSOU, which also tallies with other Universities of West Bengal. The live programme is delivered on air and the listeners are free to satisfy their curiosity on the subject through phone calls.

## **6. Major Findings:**

- NSOU is dealing with the diverse socio-economic background of the learners particularly in case of PG Geography.
- The various demographic features of the PG Geography learners are studied minutely here and it is found that NSOU has a strong impact on the learners in imparting higher education, as well as ,strengthening their society in spite of their enormous hindrances.
- Age, marital status, poor income profile of the learners is not able to create any obstacles in achieving their desired aspiration in case of higher education.
- The location of the learners seems to be very significant as learners are from rural, as well as, from urban area and they are very eager to enroll in NSOU by travelling a lot of distance.
- The streams and related issues of the enrolled learners in the PG geography courses are also found to be very significant as learners come from diverse streams and universities spread across the state of West Bengal and it surrounding states to enroll in NSOU.
- There are various issues and challenges related to the learners to get involved in the PG geography courses in NSOU and the learners prefer and choose NSOU to enhance their higher education keeping in mind the course duration, examination system, smart classroom facilities, lectures, related issues etc.
- NSOU is able to provide RS and GIS support to the PG geography learners along with the A/V lectures, which make the learners strong enough to compete with the learners of other universities of West Bengal.
- NSOU is also extending geographical access to education to the larger section of the society irrespective of the income, gender, religious status that has a strong mirror and reflective observation in strengthening the learner's societal environment.

## **7. Conclusion:**

NSOU is able to bridge the gaps and discrepancies through its ODL system in its decade-long vision of imparting distance education. The prime objective of NSOU is to circulate and impart education to all section of community irrespective of social status and dogmas. It assures wonderful arena in view of providing absolute and ultimate knowledge to the majority downtrodden masses that find no access or entry into

other institutions that fleece money from the students in West Bengal. Moreover, the regular universities of West Bengal are unable to provide all the conventional courses to the larger section of learners. The learners with poor grades do not receive any chance to pursue further education in the regular Universities and they are often bound to take the opportunity in the ODL system. Henceforth, a big aspect and better scope of higher education is streaming into the ODL system and NSOU is very active in imparting the scope of higher education to all. NSOU offers numerous scope to the learners and the need of the hour is to improve its management skill to tackle the larger existing and forthcoming learners.

NSOU provides opportunities to the larger section of the society and has become a landmark in this regard. Thus, it not only ensures educational development of the learner by elevating their economic and cultural base but also strengthens the societal progress. By bridging the gap of the literacy rate in higher education between male and female, rural and urban arena of West Bengal NSOU is on the way of becoming a premier institute. The benefits of higher education are more evenly spread between society and individual through ODL mode by way of NSOU in West Bengal. NSOU became the possible, accessible and effective alternative way to meeting the educational needs of many people and thus, be able to gain respect in the academic community with the dramatic growth of the adult learners, as well as, the population of fresh learners is making distance education an increasingly popular choice of learning techniques.

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