

Role of Study Centres in Open and Distance Learning System

(A case study on Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University)

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Background of the Research

This research paper is based on the findings of a Minor Research Project, funded by the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati. The study aimed to identify the factors which will enhance the performance of different study centres at KKHSOU. The university has more than 300 study centres at present. These Study centres play a vital role in meeting the academic needs of the learner and administrative needs of the University. Different learner support services were provided by these study centres to enhance enrollment, decrease dropout and contribute to academic success through delivery of quality distance education programme and ensuring effectiveness of a learning system. Still, there is lack of empirical research guiding the design of effective learner support systems in Open and Distance Learning. In this study, the performances of the study centres were analysed based on opinion of the learners as well as the coordinators of these study centres. Primary data were collected from structured questionnaire and analysed in SPSS17 statistical tools.

1 Introduction

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) is the first and only state open university in the entire north eastern region of India. It was established by the Act of Assam Legislative Assembly in 2005 in the name of a great son of Assam and internationally renowned scholar, late Krishna Kanta Handiqui. The University formally started functioning from December 11, 2006.

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Distance Education Council (DEC), Government of India and the University Grants Commission (UGC) have subsequently recognized the university and its programmes. It is also a member of Association of Indian Universities. The Motto of the university “*Education Beyond Barriers*” has been aptly kept in accordance with the objective of the university, i.e., providing quality education at the doorsteps to reach the unreached transcending the barriers of age, academic background, time and geographical boundaries. The University has been vested with the authority to prepare its own curricula, own system of examination and to admit, examine and confer degrees, diplomas and certificates to the learners registered with it up to degree and post degree level courses including research degrees.

This study tries to identify the factors which will enhance the performance of study centres at KKHSOU. These study centres of the university are located in 27 districts of Assam. Unless and until they function properly, it will remain a challenge to the University to make the study centres work properly. These study centres work as a bridge between the university and the learners: it communicates university’s plans and procedures to society, and it motivates the learners for better and effective learning through different learner support services. This paper is an empirical study based on both primary and secondary data and the findings of this study will provide an insight into the performance of the study centres of KKHSOU. The primary data for this study were collected by structured questionnaire and secondary data were collected from the university itself.

2 Distance Education: An Introduction

Open Universities have been a unique and spectacular development of the 20th century that has introduced the learner centres approach to education as opposed to the traditional system of education (Srivastava M., 2012). The curricula of such universities are translated through self- learning materials (SLMs) developed in various media such as print, audio, video and multi media etc. The study centres provide counseling sessions for its learners and provides Self-Learning Materials (SLMs).

Distance education system has a wide scope for the emerging learning society of north east India. The major players of Open and Distance Learning other than KKHSOU is IGNOU and IDOL in Assam. The terms *open learning* and *distance education* represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups

of learners (“Report UNESCO”, 2002). In a country like India which has a huge backlog of adult illiterates, semi literates and the educated unemployed, all in search of new knowledge and new skills including professional skills, ODL offers one of the most flexible opportunities. It is against this background that the Government of India has planned to raise enrolment in the ODL system from the current 20-22% to 40 % during the Eleventh Development Plan (2007-12)(GandheS.K,2009). KKHSOU, though a very new university tries to provide quality higher education in this arena.

3 Review of Literature

The performance of an Open University to a large extent depends on the performance of its study centres. The performance of the Study centre depends on how effectively they have provided the learner support services to their learners. Learner support service is one of the most important factors of distance education system. Being an open system it has always been open to all teaching methods and media. It combines both teaching and learning activities. Considering the significance of this area in the field of distance education, many studies have been conducted in the form of conceptual framework, or model and theoretical aspects of distance education. Besides this, some studies have been conducted in India dealing with the learner support services. As the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University is a very new university, there are very limited studies in this field. One study (Sarma, Choudhury and Senapati, 2010) found that KKHSOU is performing quite a satisfactory role in promoting higher education through Open and Distance Learning. The only drawback that they found was the lack of proper library facility in the study centres. But some studies have been made in other universities related to this topic. A study on “Course evaluation in open and distance learning: a case study from Indira Gandhi National Open University” (Gaba & Dash, 2004) found that there is very little mistakes in printed materials and most of the learners were satisfied with the study materials but they suggest that the language of the material should be simple and data used should be up to date. Another study (Tait, 2000) suggests a model framework to study student support services. (Gaba & Koo, 2007) finds relationship between distance education and human resource development and explains the futuristic model of distance training for on the job learners. The study (Harichandan, 1990) state that for effective learner support services there has to be four basic tools which are print based study material, assignments, personal contact programmes and study centres.

With this background in view, the present study is aimed at studying the

performance of different study centres to enhance Learner Support Services as is available in the KKHSOU.

4 Research Methodology adopted for the Study

The project made an empirical research study based on both primary and secondary data. The present strength of learners of KKHSOU is about seventy thousands, enrolled through more than 300 study centres located in various parts of the State of Assam. Hence, for collection of information, stratified random sampling technique is used to cover the learners, and co-ordinators of study centres belonging to remote backward areas, tribal areas, hilly areas, semi-urban and urban areas for proper representation of samples. The questionnaire includes both open ended and close ended questions. Besides these data collection was done by qualitative methods like- discussion, focus group and personal observation etc. The sample size has been determined both by qualitative and quantitative approach. For the purpose of this study 56 study centres constituting about 20 percent of the total study centres in each district, are selected through the stratification and the evidences from co-ordinators and centre-in-charges of the selected study centres are taken as complete enumeration.

Data were collected from a total of 769 learners of 56 different study centres of KKHSOU in entire Assam.

4.1 Questionnaire Development

For the purposes of this study, two sets of structured questionnaire have been developed based on the indicators defined by David Kember (Kember, 1990). The questionnaire is developed in accordance with three “performance” identified as *academic performance*, *administrative performance* and *promotional performance*.

In this study the **Academic performance** includes the following attributes:

1. Assignment handling.
2. Counseling classes.
3. Academic environment.
4. Library services.
5. Mentoring.
6. Teachers training.

The **Administrative performance** includes:

1. Information display
2. Responsiveness and attitudes of the staff towards the learners
3. Co-ordinator’s autonomy
4. Learners satisfaction

5. Operational timing of the institution
6. Infrastructure
7. Telephone and e-mail contact to learners
8. Working as a bridge between the learners and the University

The Promotional performance includes:

1. Information related to new programmes
2. Information for modular programmes
3. Different media of advertisements (print, online and telephonic) to reach learners.

For the purpose of this study, one set of questionnaire is developed for the learners, one set for coordinators.

4.2 Measurement of Reliability

Reliability was measured by measuring the reliability coefficient, or Cronbach's alpha, which is defined as the average of all possible split- half coefficients resulting from different ways of splitting the scale items (Cronbach, 1951). The coefficient varies between 0 and 1, where a value of 0.6 or less generally indicates unsatisfactory internal consistency reliability (Nunnally,1978). For all the attributes of this study, the value of Cronbach's alpha is above 0.75 which indicate the consistency of reliability of the statements.

5 Objectives of the study

KKHSOU is at its nascent stage, due to which there has been very little study done in this field. The objective of the study is to measure the performance of study centres which is broadly divided into three basic performances: Academic performance of the study centre, Administrative performance of study centre and Promotional Performance of the study centre.

6 Analysis

To analyse the performance of the study centres, the survey has been conducted among the 56 selected study centres of the university and data were collected from 769 learners and 56 coordinators of those centres.

In order to get learners' feedback about the quality of study materials, suitability of assignment response, effectiveness of personal contact programme lectures and the facilities available at the study centre, feedback devices and other support services provided by the study centres, the close ended questionnaire for learners was developed. The questionnaire was basically designed to yield data that could be used as feedback from the learners to critically study and

assess the existing Learner Support Services.

6.1 *Demographic profiles of learner:*

Demographic profiles of the surveyed learner states that 53.7 percent learners are male and 46.3 percent learners are female. As the study was conducted based on stratified and convenient sampling, it was observed that the rate of male learners were slightly more compared to the female learners.

For measuring effectiveness of a programme different level of satisfaction of the learners are required. Hence, different questions were asked to the learners relating to the performance of the study centres and the findings were given as follows.

All the Distance Education institutions had the provision for Personal Contact Programmes or counseling classes to support their learning (Dutt, 1976 and Biswal 1979). In KKHSOU, though the university study centres of KKHSOU provide counselling classes for its learners, but attendance is not compulsory. Selection of venue for personal contact programmes (PCPs), employment positions of learners, their financial difficulties and lack of prior information to learners are some of the factors which influence learners' attendance at PCPs. During the survey, when the learners were asked, the responses were as follows:

From Table 1, the following points have been observed:

- The overall performance of the different study centres of KKHSOU is quite satisfactory.
- The process of information dissemination is also good.
- The performance of counselors can be enhanced more through training.
- Students of conventional education system have access to classroom teaching, libraries, teachers, counselors, peer groups etc., but studying at a distance, learners feel isolated. Feeling of belongingness can also be improved through different activities.
- Library facilities at different study centres need to be improved and learners should be able to borrow books from Study centre's library.

Table 1 Analysis of Learner’s Response

Question	Response(frequency)		Percentage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you have regular counselling classes at your study centre?	677	92	88	12
Do you receive notices and circulars on time?	693	76	90.1	9.95
Do you receive assignments on time?	687	82	89.3	10.7
Are you satisfied with the infrastructure facilities provided by the study centre?	681	88	88.6	11.4
Do they agree with the statement that “counsellors are able to clarify their doubts”?	499	270	65	35
Do they feel proud of your study centre?	500	269	65.4	34.6
Do you feel proud of being associated with KKHSOU?	508	261	66	34
Does the study centre provide information related to different programmes of the university?	527	242	68.5	31.5
Do you recommend this study centre to others?	554	215	72.1	27.9
Are you satisfied with the academic environment of this study centre?	647	122	84.2	15.8
Do they think the coordinators and staff members are very helpful?	670	99	87.2	12.8
Did your study centre provide counseling classes on time?	590	179	76.7	23.3
Do you get good library facility in your study centre?	379	390	49.4	49.6
Does the study centre provide SMS alert service to you through telephone or e-mail?	527	242	68.5	31.5

While conducting the survey for Coordinators of different study centres, the following points have been observed (Table 2):

Table 2 Analysis of Coordinators' Responses

Question	Response(frequency)		Percentage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you conduct regular counselling classes for each subject at your study centre?	46	10	82	18
Do you provide proper library facility to learners?	46	10	82	18
When asked the coordinators, whether the infrastructural facilities available in this centre are adequate	50	6	89	11
Are you happy as a coordinator of KKHSOU?	51	5	91.1	8.9
Do you get timely information from the university?	18	38	32.1	67.9
Do you provide up to date information to the learners?	41	15	73.2	26.8
Do you feel pressurized or overloaded, while doing this task?	51	5	91.1	8.9

6.2 Interpretation

- From Table 2, it has been observed from the study that majority of the coordinators are not satisfied with the communication inflow from the university but they think the communication out flow from their side is good. They also feel pressurized or overloaded with work.
- Most of the study centres are quite satisfied with the infrastructural facilities provided by the university but some study centres feel that depending on the enrollment of the learners, large study centres should get more infrastructural facilities.

7 Limitations of the Study

The present empirical study may not provide a comprehensive analysis of all possible issues but it does offer a penetrating insight into the issues involved

in the management of distance education system in Assam. Following are the major limitations of the study:

- The study has been conducted in a very short duration of time, so it was not possible to survey all the study centres of KKHSOU.
- A very small sample size has been taken for this study. Therefore, it may not be able to reflect the exact picture of the university.

8 Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of this study further indicated that the majority of the learners at this campus showed high levels of satisfaction regarding counseling sessions and performance of study centres. This reveals that overall the study centres are successful in bridging the gap between learner and the university.

It is worth mentioning that open and distance learning will be an important element of future education and training systems. The emergence of new forms of distance learning based on new information and communication technologies, in particular those supported by the Internet and using the World Wide Web, have significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications. Governmental leadership concerning network development and access will be essential in this sphere. Higher education including open & distance learning is an instrument of transformation for society with quality education. Quality assurance must cover areas such as curriculum design, content and delivery organization; teaching, learning and assessment; etc

From the above study it has been found that, KKHSOU is performing quite a satisfactory role in promoting higher education through Open and Distance Learning. The areas where the University needs to be concerned is the lack of proper library facility in the study centres and proper utilization of resources provided by the University. Each Study centre should have a well-stocked library with multiple copies of study materials, reference books, and adequate reading room facilities and also the facility of borrowing books. If the university works in this regard, then it will help them in acquiring more learners.

Again, from the study, it was observed that, the academic performance, administrative performance as well as promotional performance of the study centre is quite satisfactory from both the learners and coordinators point of view. It has also been observed from the study that most of the Study centre does not provide pre enrollment counseling to the learners, which need to be taken care of by the University. Physical infrastructure development at study centres will help some centres in building proper learner support services. The university should also take initiative for counseling the drop out learners at different study centres.

9 Scope for Future Study

KKHSOU is now serving large number of learners over a wide range of academic disciplines across the state. The existing Student Support Services may not be adequate in future. Hence the University needs to closely monitor the activities of different study centres and update its curriculum time to time. The study also reveals that there is a positive relationship between learners' academic performance and effective use of support systems. Hence, it needs to be strengthened. The University has been making all efforts to maintain the quality of education. However, the University may face certain difficulties in extending the benefit to the stakeholders because of its dependence on the study centres. Developments are expected in the near future in the field of open and distance learning, as well as of new designs associated with them. Efforts from the university needs to be made to bring all the study centres equally into the fold of this University by providing necessary facilities in addition to the existing facilities of the study centres so that such centres develop the sense of belongingness towards this University and are encouraged to deliver quality education to the knowledge seekers. The university needs to establish easy connectivity with the study centres for dissemination of instructional materials from the headquarters and also to monitor the activities of different study centres and quick redress of difficulties faced by them from time to time.

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