Open and Distance Education in Kerala: Current Trends, Prospects and Possibilities

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Abstract: The distance education was introduced in early 1960's in India has developed in corresponding with the evolution of technology. As with the introduction of ICT and its rapid development, the distance education can bridge the gap of the 'distance' of educational facilities through ICT. With all these developments and initiatives, even now after the introduction of ICT's in distance education, most of the distance education centres have no such access to educational technologies and the students have not much idea about the ICT's and its educational purposes. Quantitative study was conducted in the open and distance learning institutions in Kerala, Indiaexposed that majority of the students in open and distance education did not get the benefit of ICT in their learning. The students are using the social media and other internet facilities but they are unaware of the educational purposes of ICT. This reveals the inadequateness of the applicability and imparting of ICT enabled teaching and learning in ODL centres.This is contradictory to the aims of the concept of open and distance learning. The paper emphasizes the use of ICT in open and distance education and reveals its absence in the current educational scenario of ODL even with the swift application in the information and communication technology. This paper also analyzes the possibilities, prospects and ponders in finding practical solutions on the use of ICT in open and distance education in the twenty first century.

Keywords: *Computer aided assessment*, *Distance education*, *Information and communication technology*, *Instructional media*, *Open education*

I.   Introduction

Globalization contributes to a wide diffusion of ideas and values mobilizing international attention to universalistic issues and challenges. A change is visible in almost everything and obviously, education is not an exception to it. In the context of an ever changing world, the central role played by education to favor social and professional integration appears to be highly reinforced. Globalization has permitted technical progress in the communications field which enables users, access and exchange information anytime and from anywhere and its major contribution being global connectivity through ICT's. ICT's connectivity in education is one of the bi-product of globalization (Trivedi,2010).Under the spirit of concept of globalization, the transformation of technologies and its utility/applicability in the field of education (here open and distance learning/ODL) should be looked into the light of changed global outlook in general and ponder into the myriad vistas of its utility, absorption, transmission and practicability.

Multimedia holds greater promise in enhancing learning as well as in improving the quality of education. Hofsteffer strongly believes that multimedia is an effective medium for learning. Multimedia ensures active participation on part of the learner as opposed to passive learning listening to lectures and demonstrations. Being nonlinear and interactive in nature, it could extend or stimulate student attention, concentration and enthusiasm in learning especially applicable in ODL.

Over the past decades, India has emerged as the driving force in the field of information and communication technology. Indian ICT skills have gained world reputation and the world is looking forward to symbiotic relationship with Indian ICT education and training. It successfully meets the offshore and inland IT talent requirements through its educational institutions and communication industry.

Universities and higher education institutions in India are in process of developing the skill based initiatives via the approaches including enhancing the quality, quantity and relevance of the higher education system, promoting industry owned integrated skill development programme, introduction of faculty quality and so on. It has been visualized that the integration of information technology in teaching, learning and management process in educational institutions as the central matter in ensuring quality and relevance in human skill development, academia and equipping the former (teacher&learner) to meet the modern day digital age necessities. Nevertheless an IT based education collaboration network can form or forms the foundations for an effective education system suiting the development requirement of India.

Inspite of significant strides achieved in educational system, certain ambiguities remain in imparting/ transmitting the real essence of technological aided learning at institutions in the country. Question arises how far the integration of information technology been ably utilized in technology, how far it has been absorbed by the learners? How the efficiency and relevance of classroom instruction at all levels from literacy to higher education and research and open learning been calculated? Leaving aside the oft deliberated use of ICT in educational scenario with school and higher education, it becomes more relevant to ponder into the less trodden arena of open and distance education.

The genesis of ODL system is in the concerns for access & equity, relevance & quality, affordability & sustainability, continuous professional development & lifelong learning, training and reframing. The open and distance education becomes all the more important as it is the common hub where people of all ages meet, several generations interact, people irrespective of class, regional, language variations meet and hence a unification among the diversity occurs. Thus it becomes inevitable for ensuring quality institution of literature and technology.

In India, the genesis of the higher education outside the purview of formal system was facilitated through correspondence courses and radio talks during the 1st five year plans. The first generation distance education in the form of correspondence courses for expanding educational opportunities at tertiary level had its origin in the decisive recommendations of the Kothari committee in 1961. Later striding various phases, the establishment of the First Open University-the Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University; in 1982 was materialized. Its success played a crucial role in the establishment of the Asia's largest Open University- the India Gandhi National Open University or IGNOU in 1985. Democratization of higher education by offering degrees, diplomas and certificates and working towards promotion, coordination and regulation of open system of education in the country was its aim.

Since the establishment of the first open university in India in 1982, there has been significant changes in the provisions and use of new media and advanced technology in education, use of tele-communication media, internet and web based systems and emergence of m-learning provide learners a flexible environment with options to study from any place on the globe to suit their individual requirements.

Pertinently it is notable that the open learning (IGNOU) caters to every fourth student in higher education and is expected to be learner friendly, vastly organized, vibrant and dynamic system capable of providing high quality individualized instruction of uniform standard at low cost but in a superior learning environment to all anywhere anytime using ICTs. Shift of focus from teacher to learner and to self learning by the use of multiple media instructional package where print is supplemented by technology is envisaged. ODL envisages the use of technology in curriculum delivery and learning incorporating media options from audio-video to internet based access and e-resources of the modern day age. Media-audio-visual, radio, TV, teleconferencing and video conferencing and tools like computer, CDR's, telephone/ mobile, DVDs, satellite, internet etc are utilized in ODL.

Integration of ICTs through a range of resources such as Radio, educational Television and teleconferencing, satellite based education through EDUSAT(GyanDarshan, GyanVani, GyanKosh, Saakshat), internet tools, internet radio, IPTV (Internet Protocol Television), M-learning etc are priorities of ODL which are in the global trends in ICTs include convergence, miniaturization, increased mobility, enhanced processing power and reduced cost.

II. Pertinent Concerns

The utilization of each of these media's of learning is to be pondered and how far its applicability in teaching and learning in ODL. In general digital technologies especially internet based are commonly assessed. But the utilization of these ICT resources varies to regions and educational cultures imparting ODL.

Use of IT though envisaged, provides opportunity/is framed for impacting hardware and software infrastructure for enabling content development and instruction. It is aimed at improving the quality of classroom instruction. However,supplementing with corroborative evidence, it is pitiable that the faculty is seldom being employed by the teacher nor the academic centres hosting the open and distance learning. Though they have the facilities for such mode of instructions its use is rather minimal or hardly applicable to open and distance learning.

Using of EDUSAT based learning too lacks ground and its possibilities has seldom been utilized effectively in open and distance learning. Teaching and learning though IT based satellite enabled information and receiving of learning content/ materials, education management , evaluation and interaction is limited at open and distance learning centres. Infact it remains at desideratum. Despite the fact that the ODL institutions have done enormous investments in ICT based infrastructure, it has been found that their ICT enabled academic delivery is not very popular among the students. Most facilities (GyanDarshan, Teleconferencing, Edusat learning) usage is minimal as studies suggest. The case is not different in Kerala also.

Utility/ media adoption in various open universities in India could be seen satisfactorily using ICT's (study by SweshGarg, infrastructure between education an emerging new technologies), but the case is not altogether satisfactory/applicable in ODL centres elsewhere in the country. Studies on the same in several others may be highly disappointing, even may (reverse gear?) the applicability of ICT's in ODL's. Such revelations based on reality first hand studies could neither be hidden nor exaggerated as it showcases the reality or failures in ensuring the utility of ICT learning in ODL's and its mismanagement. It may even feel the entire concept of ICT integration in ODL has been de-tracked at one or has lose ground.

Studies reveal or lead us to an undesirable situation; the technology was expected to increase widen access and bridge the knowledge gap but is likely to end up achieving the opposite. It may be shocking to know that the high sounding buzzwords technology/electronic guided achievements like e-governance, E-learning, one like education remains just at the cream and has not infiltrated or influenced the core of its beneficiaries for whom it was implemented.

E-learning allows to have the best of both 'asynchronous and synchronous' learning environments. Web course units with interactive exercises, online computer material assignments, online diary submission, project submissions, e-counseling, e-library are vistas of ICT enabled learning and the access to these provide opportunity to the ODL learner to atleast get in touch with the ICT resources and get first hand information. Unfortunately, such initiatives are yet to be realized in several ODL institutions and centers offering the same. The potential of such access are minimized and least afforded or encouraged by these centers (especially Kerala University centers, IGNOU centers etc.)

III. Epistemological View Points/Review

Research in this direction has been similarly carried out by S. Raja Rao from Andhra Pradesh which gives insight into some related aspects pertaining to this present study (Rao, 2009). His study on the awareness among students about use of media in BRAOU study centres is indeed thought provoking. Also studies related but not of direct relevance regarding the utilization of ICT facilities by PG students in Kerala University have come up in this respect and are in a way useful to this study. (Naseema, 2011)

Distance education has traversed four or five 'generations' of technology in its history. These are print, audio/videos broadcasting, audio/video teleconferencing, computer aided institution, e-learning/online learning computer broadcasting, webcasting etc. and has reached the latest technical innovations. But the effective utilization and the absorption of these in teaching and learning process within the ODL institutions and individual learners are quite skeptical and needs a rethinking. This abnormality in resource utilization and effective utility is being researched upon in this study.

The data from the field is not encouraging to the open universities, which are experimenting and implementing different kinds of innovative ICTs to provide education and educational services through distance mode of learning. It empirically highlights in spite of using wide variety of media lessons and services, majority of the distance learners at the grass root level are not aware of them. It means ODL institutions should pay more attention to provide information to the learners in addition to offer of media services. Then only the learners will get benefited. Otherwise the ICT efforts will not yield desired results. The paper suggests different strategies to be adopted to inform the learners about media services provided by open universities.

IV. Objectives

The major objectives of the present study are:-
* Analyze ICT use among the students of ODL centers in KUSDE & IGNOU regional centers.
* Seek viewers perceptions of the need for ICT use in ODL
* Obtain students/respondents opinion/usage of ICT resources in their learning in centers and also self learning
* Determine the usage of ICT in ODL learners daily life and resource utilization
* Review the inherent limits and drawbacks or lacking in providing ICT resources in ODL centers.
* Obtain the ODL students extend of awareness on ICT resources and its possibilities.
* Seek/find suggestions for improvement and gap filling
* Find out the access of media initiatives of learners and awareness of media support services and infrastructure at the study centres.
* Find out reasons for not utilizing ICT/media
* Suggests multi prolonged strategy to make media popular among ODL.
* Determine the utility of ICT by both genders.

V.   Sampling

The study is based on the purposive random sampling method of data collection. The study centres of IGNOU at Mar Ivanios College Thiruvananthapuram and the School of Distance Education Centre at University of Kerala were selected for collection of data. The data were collected from BA, MA students of ODL both especially of social science stream and from the subjects like Sociology, History, Economics and Public Administration. The sample size is 100 learners and out of which 65% are females and 35% are males. Care has been taken to cover different age groups from rural and urban areas of the social strata.

VI.   Methodology

Both primary and secondary data was collected for the present study. The primary data is collected from the ODL centres in University of Kerala and the secondary source of data is derived from research books and articles.

VII.   Results

The results of the present study are analyzed with the various aspects related to the open and distance education and the use of ICT in teaching-learning process.

7.1.   Awareness of Instructional support of media

Respondents were asked various questions based on the questionnaire distributed primarily in a major IGNOU centre at Trivandrum under the Regional IGNOU centre and Distance Learning centre of the School of Distance Education of the University of Kerala. An attempt is made to find the awareness of the students about the instructional support of media in the ODL system of education. In this technological era, the students are always using the current technologies for social networking and communication. Like this, the instructional and learning purposes of the media are also important in the educational system.

Table I: Awareness about instructional support of media

Response	Yes	No	Percent
IGNOU study centre	90	10	100
Distance education centre	98	2	100

The data shown in the table reveals that the respondents are much aware about the instructional support of media. They are aware about the use of media and internet for the educational purposes. They are mainly using the media like television, radio, video cassette player, tape recorder etc. the use of telephone/ Mobile phone is also helpful for the easy accessibility of internet services for the students.

7.2.   Educational channels of IGNOU
Table II: Status of watching educational channels of IGNOU

Response	Watching education channels	Not watching education channels	Percent
IGNOU study centre	7	93	100
Distance education centre	3	97	100

IGNOU started various educational channels for the use of easy access to the instructional materials to the students. From the above table it reveals that, the majority of respondents are not watching/ viewing any of the educational channels of IGNOU. Only a meager number of the respondents are watching the educational channels of IGNOU for the study related purposes.

7.3.   Instructional aids of Radio/TV
Table III: Help from the Radio/TV based curriculum for studies

Response	Yes	No	Percent
IGNOU study centre	50	50	100
Distance education centre	33	67	100

Now with the advancement of technology, the radio and TV are used for various kinds of educational purposes, and formed the initial support systems of the ODL.s. The curriculum based on Radio/TV is not much accepted and used among the students. The 50% of therespondents does not agree with the use of radio/TV based curriculum and its benefits in education while another 50% are agreed with the use of radio/TV based curriculum in education.

7.4. Teleconferencing
Table IV: Utilization of teleconferencing in open and distance learning

Response	Yes	No	Percent
IGNOU study centre	4	96	100
Distance education centre	0	100	100

Teleconferencing is yet another innovative strategy for enabling teaching learning process more effective. In the open learning system, the use of teleconferencing is very significant in theory but not applicable in its true sense. The majority of the respondents are not using the benefits of teleconferencing in their open learning while only a minimum number of students in IGNOU open learning system are using the teleconferencing in their open learning.

7.5. Use of internet based computer programmes
Table V: Usage of internet based computer programmes of IGNOU

Response	Using	Not using	Percent
IGNOU study centre	6	94	100
Distance education centre	4	98	100

Though IGNOU started many internet based computer programs, its applicability is less in the learning centres of IGNOU. Most of the centres of IGNOU have no such facility in the practice of technology for the students. The majority of the respondents opined that there is no use for the internet based computer programmes for their studies. This remains a contradiction in this internet age and the applicability of internet for learning. The unawareness of the students in this regard is grave and needs a serious deliberation.

7.6. Interactive Video Counseling
Table VI:Availing of interactive radio counseling

Response	Using interactive radio counseling	Not using interactive radio counseling	Percent
IGNOU study centre	0	100	100
Distance education centre	0	100	100

The interactive radio counseling is another major initiative started by IGNOU. All the respondents are of the opinion that they didn't get any opportunity for participating in the interactive radio counseling program. This remains altogether a Null programme.

VIII.   Strategies And Suggestions
Strategies should be taken to adopt the internet technologies in ODL are:
8.1. Support from the teachers and availability of infrastructure
- Changing mindset of the practitioners of DE, ie university teachers, academic in the field, conventional peers, coordinators, counselors, programme in charge at centres about use of technology. Training and retraining in new media should be compulsorily part of institutional medium. Also integration of technology in study materials, specifically for disciplines of web based courses and also print based courses.
- ODL centres should equip themselves with tech based/ ICT based learning and ensure its maximum utility in classroom instruction. Only then quality of learning be enhanced and inturn also equip the learners to use or incorporate the ICT's in their self learning, which will be more productive and enable more absorbing of content.
- IT helps to address challenges facing like improving performance, improving teacher training and improving the quality of the educational institutional material.

8.2. Shift of focus from traditional to modern technologies
- ODL institutions should explore possibilities of mobile phone advantages (as it is common/affordable to all) for sending examination dates, assignment deadlines to enrolled students, class hours and dates, academic related matters etc.
- Mere lecture based conventional traditional programmes should be done away with or support with visual aids for easy and interesting learning.
- ODL institutions to arrange frequent training and orientation, conferences for its teachers/staffs and students on multimedia technologies and its possibilities in learning and daily needs.
- ODL institutions should aim for providing ICT/multimedia learning packages to its students.

8.3. Training for Teachers

· Most ODL institutions/ centres need a much more comprehensive participation of both faculty and students for the effective integration of technology into the teaching and learning process. (the case of faculty training and coaching is not much importance, because most in KU or IGNOU are capable of using these media, but are seldom resorting to it in class room teaching. Yet training at intervals or at periodical workshops would also prove fruitful).

8.4. Institutional Support

· The ODL institutions must focus more on enabling ICT learning such as use of PowerPoint& interactive white board to capture attention of students (though these facilities are available in IGNOU centre at Mar Ivanios, it is least utilized)

· Also audience response system (ARS) which allows immediate feedback tests and class room discussions can be more practicable.

· Possibilities of E-learning 2.0 can be more utilized in ODL. Intervention of these would be more interesting and productive. Increased emphasis on social learning and use of social software such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, and virtual worlds can be more fruitful. This phenomenon referred to as Long Tail Learning can enable/suit both academic and social interaction and above all enhance individual connectivity and resourcefulness and also would encourage them to be independent learners.

8.5. Computer Aided Assessment

· Once the ICTs and its benefits are absorbed by the students of ODL, and become capable of using ICT in their learning of subjects, the ODL institutions should move to computer aided assessment/of work load/projects/assignments.

8.6. Regular usage of ICT

· Students of ODL centres should initially be introduced to ICT learning and technologies and benefits in their first class itself. Regular ICT usage should be emphasized in class hours/separate hours to be allowed for ICT familiarization and note taking. Periodical monitoring, training and workshops/sessions would prove practical to these.

8.7. Monitoring and evaluation of ICT usage

· Ensure the constant monitoring and interference of the Distance Education Council or DEC.(DEC- the arm of IGNOU responsible for coordination, promotion and maintenance of standards in distance education) in the Regional Study Centres and periodical quality evaluation. (Prakash&Biswal,2008)

· The DEC should establish and follow procedures to ensure that its regulatory authority and powers of approval for introduction of programmes over all institutions offering education through distance mode are established effectively with a view to assuring appropriate standards of distance education.

IX.   Conclusion

Although there has been widespread use of technologies for teaching and learning in recent years, they are yet to bring major changes in the way teaching and also learning is organized, delivered and imbibed. Without such changes technology enabled teaching and learning will remain a marginalized activity, unproductive and failing to meet the real objectives of its inception. The strategies suggested here will contribute positively for adopting the technologies in distance education system. Reiterating Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam's vision "India's system of education and skill generation can be transferred in a decade if we can creatively and purposefully deploy IT technologies". (Kalam)

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