

A Tracer Study of Disabled Distance Learners of IGNOU and their Employability
Theme: Social Justice
Sub-theme: Education & Employment of Persons with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

The flexibility offered by distance learning in space, pace, and course options provide an alternative system of seeking higher education by most of the adults who could not go through the conventional college/university education. More specifically, it provides ample opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalized to upgrade their knowledge and skills in various disciplines.

Indira Gandhi National Open University, India, has made remarkable contributions in offering higher education and training in various fields of study with a nation-wide network of student support services, both face-to-face and technology enabled.

As per the Census of India 2001, the disability prevalence rate in the country is about 22 million persons (2.19 % of the total population) as against the 58th round of National Sample Survey 2002 which estimated that the country has 18.5 million persons with disabilities.

In this context, the present study attempts to carry out a micro-level analysis of the contribution of IGNOU in providing higher education opportunities to the 'disabled'. The data on students with 'disability' and enrolled over a period of seven years in selected learner support centres are analyzed and reported here.

In the area of disability studies among distance learners, Ommerborn, R. (1998, 2001) has made an extensive review of studies worldwide. The review suggests need for improving the disabled-specific support services and its access to needy students. According to Horn & Berktold (1999), based on longitudinal data for 1989-90 enrolled students in postsecondary education, a majority of students with disability are males and older by as compared to their counterparts. Further, nearly one-half of those with disabilities left the college without completing their studies as against one-third of students without disabilities.

Susan D. Moisey (2004) had analyzed the characteristics, enrolment and completion rates of undergraduate students with disability at Athabasca University. The study finds that most of the disabled students have received one or more types of assistance and support for their studies and it has improved their course completion rate.

Burgstahler (2001) has suggested Universal Instructional Design to enhance access to and success of disabled students in both distance and on-campus setting. Fichten, Asuncion, Barile and Lamb (2003) had studied disability services provided in Canadian higher education institutions, both on-campus and distance education setting. They have raised serious concern over need for improving disability-specific access and support services in distance education institutions. Kim-Rupnow, Dowrick and Burke (2001) have emphasized the need for outcome based research to understand the access and effectiveness of disability-specific support for students with disability in distance education.

In the context of India, Ramanujam, P.R. (2001) in his paper had discussed the basic framework for higher education of the disabled adults and training of different categories of personnel working in the disability sector.

Sharma, Umesh (2005) in this paper had reviewed the scenario of inclusive and integrated education in India and presented the issues and challenges that need to be addressed by the Indian administrators and educators in moving towards more integrated education.

Exclusive research studies in India focusing on access, support and success of students with disability in distance education mode is very scanty. One possible reason could be that the data on students with disabilities at higher education level is either not collected or not easily available for researchers. Secondly, lack of or total non-existence of disabled-specific access devices and use of technology to reach out to students with disability, especially, by the distance education institutions also limits the researchers in studying the impact/effectiveness of support services to students with disabilities in distance mode.

A summary of the experiences of western countries in providing access to postsecondary/higher education for students with disabilities in conventional and ODL mode has brought the following important points:

- ◆ In recent years, across the world, there is an increase in the enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education.
- ◆ disability-specific support services received little attention in distance education system as compared to on-campus education
- ◆ Lack of information on admissions and disability-specific services for disabled students in distance education limits the understanding of their problem
- ◆ Available research studies in the field show that only fewer than half of the enrolled students with disabilities receive support for their higher education
- ◆ Application of adaptive technology to assist learning of disabled has shown positive results in reaching out the disabled and it had improved their success rate.
- ◆ Students with disabilities are facilitated through various forms of e-learning that had increased their access and success in learning.

PRESENT STUDY

The present paper is based on a tracer study to identify students with disabilities enrolled in various programmes of IGNOU. The study describes the characteristics, enrollment, support services received, completion rates and employability of students with disabilities.

The study has considered only the Bachelors and Masters Degree programmes of IGNOU for analysis. Within this programmes having entrance test and selection by rank order (B.Ed., B.Sc.-Nursing and MBA) are omitted to standardize for "equal opportunities" during admission.

The duration of study for a Bachelors Degree is minimum of three years and maximum of eight years, and for Masters Degree minimum of two years and maximum of five years. Hence, students enrolled from January 2000 to July 2006 only are considered for the study, allowing for the latest batch to have minimum duration to complete the Programme.

A total of 52 students with disabilities were enrolled in various Bachelors and Masters Degree programmes of IGNOU during 2000-2006, in five Lerner Support Centres of Panaji Regional Centre, Goa, The data were compiled from University admission data starting from January 2000 to July 2006 and convocation data from 2004 to 2010. The latest result status of the sample studies were also down loaded from IGNOU main website for analysis.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The programme-wise distribution of disabled students is shown in Table-1. The University has launched MEG, MHD, MSO (MA in English, Hindi and Sociology respectively) and MCOM programmes in various years.

Table-1: Programme and Year-Wise Distribution of Students with Disabilities.

PROGRAM	YEAR OF ADMISSION					
	2000	2003	2004	2005	2006	TOTAL
BA	0	4	3	2	1	10
BCOM	0	1	1	4	3	9
BSC	3	0	0	1	3	7
BLIS	1	0	6	2	0	9
BCA	1	4	0	1	0	6
MCA	0	0	4	1	0	5
MLIS	0	0	1	0	0	1
MEG	0	0	1	0	0	1
MHD	0	1	0	0	0	1
MCOM	0	0	0	0	2	2
MSO	0	0	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	5	10	16	12	9	52

Over the seven years period, 41 students with disabilities registered for Bachelors and 11 students for Masters Degree programmes. A majority of students of Bachelors and Masters Degree belong to programmes having Skill development and practical components, i.e. Science, Computer Application and Library Sciences. Although the number of registered students with disabilities is very low, it clearly demonstrates that a majority would prefer to go for skill oriented studies.

The learners are distributed between the age of 19 and 45 years with a mean age of 24.96 years. The mean age for females is 23.89 and for males it is 25.58. The learners are classified into two age groups for analysis. It is significant to note that a majority of students with disabilities in the age group of 19-25 have registered for graduation and Masters Degree after 25. It indicates, like their counterparts in distance learning mode, the disabled did start their postsecondary education at the right age, though not very late. One may infer that distance learning can greatly contribute in providing higher education to potential learners with disabilities.

Table-2: Characteristics of Students with Disabilities.

Age	BA	BCOM	BSC	BLIS	BCA	MCA	MCOM	MEG	MHD	MLIS	MSO	TOTAL
19-25	8	8	6	6	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	33
above 25	2	1	1	3	1	5	2	1	1	1	1	19
Gender												
Female	2	0	5	4	3	2	2	0	0	0	1	19
Male	8	9	2	5	3	3	0	1	1	1	0	33
Area												
Rural	3	4	5	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	0	19
Urban	7	5	2	8	5	3	1	1	0	0	1	33
Marital Status												
Married	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	4
Unmarried	10	8	7	9	6	4	2	1	0	0	1	48
Employment Status												
Employed	3	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Unemployed	7	8	7	8	5	5	2	1	1	1	1	46

A majority of learners with disabilities are males. For Bachelors degree, percentage of females opting for Science, Computer Applications and Library Sciences is higher than that of males. About 37% of students with disabilities are from rural areas, while it is 63% in case of urban areas. In terms of choice of programmes with and without skill components, we find no significant difference across rural and urban areas. It may be noted that all the five Learner Support Centres from where the enrolment data were drawn are located in urban areas. One may infer that, given the required support services, students with disabilities from both the rural and urban areas can successfully be brought into the main stream of higher education.

In terms of Marital Status, four students with disabilities, who are males, are found married and are aged 27 years and above at the time of enrolling for their studies. Among females, there were 4 students below the age of 21 years and 9 were in the age of 21-25, while six were above the age of 25, but none are married at the time of joining their programme of study.

Out of 52 students with disabilities, only six were employed at the time of joining their studies with IGNOU, all of them are males and aged 24 years and above. It is very significant to note that all the 19 female students with disability are not working and unmarried when they joined their programme of study. One may infer that, female disabled students are doubly disadvantaged and serious efforts are to be taken to provide access and support services for their postsecondary education through distance learning mode.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND COMPLETION RATE

All the 52 students with disabilities were contacted through mailed un-structured questionnaire/telephone to know about the support services that they have received. We had received only 24 responses out of 52 and the possible reason for non-response include change of mailing address and telephone numbers. An analysis of the responses shows the following as major support services received by the students of disabled:

- a) Receipt of printed study material
- b) Counseling sessions during week ends
- c) Reimbursement of programme fee as per government norms
- d) Information on examination
- e) Extra time/allotment of writer/special seating arrangements during written examination

In case of Masters Degree one male candidate each registered for MEG and MLIS and one female candidate of MSO and have completed the studies successfully and received their degrees. In case of five disabled students of MCA, three have registered for all the three years (six semesters), of which one female candidate had completed successfully and received the degree, while two not successful due to non-completion of theory examinations.

Table-3: Programme-wise Registration details of Students with Disabilities.

Programme	Registered for			Total(N=52)
	Year-1	Year-2	All 3-Years	
BA	5	1	4	10
BCOM	3	2	4	9
BSC	4	1	2	7
BCA	1	2	3	6
MCA	1	1	3	5
BLIS	9			9
MLIS	1			1
MCOM	1	1		2
MEG	0	1		1
MHD	0	1		1
MSO	0	1		1

In case of three-year Bachelors Degree, out of 32 disabled students 13 have registered for all three-years of studies, but only one female student of BA and one male student of BCOM have successfully completed the studies and received their degrees. It is significant to note that none of the candidates registered for BCA and BSC have completed their studies successfully. Similarly, in case of nine disabled students registered for BLIS only three, two male and one female students, have received their degree while others are yet to complete some of the theory examinations

Table-4: Programme-wise successful completion

PROGRAM	Successfully completed		TOTAL
	YES	NO	
BA	1	9	10
BCA	0	6	6
BCOM	1	8	9
BLIS	3	6	9
BSC	0	7	7
MCA	1	4	5
MCOM	1	1	2
MEG	1	0	1
MHD	0	1	1
MLIS	1	0	1
MSO	1	0	1
TOTAL	10	42	52

Among the 52 disabled students, 30 candidates have registered for all years of study. But out 30, only ten, five male and five female candidates have successfully received their degrees. Apart from convocation data of the university, the results of all the 52 candidates were down loaded from the IGNOU official website to analyze their completion rate. Excluding the 10 candidates who have received their degrees, remaining 20 disabled students who have registered for all years could not successfully complete their studies mainly due to non-completion of theory examination. These 20 students include 3 each of BA, BCOM, and BCA, 2 each of BSC and MCA, 6 of BLIS and one of MHD. Appropriate support services including extra counseling sessions and strategies to prepare for exam may facilitate these learners to complete their studies successfully.

EMPLOYABILITY

Out of 52 students with disabilities, contact was established with 24 students through phone and by post. Thus the findings reported here has serious limitations and based on telephonic conversation with 24 respondents. Among the 24 students who have responded, 19 were employed. For the purpose of analyses remaining 33 were classified under 'no response'.

Table-5: Present Employment of students with disability

Program	Presently employed	No response	Total
BA	3	7	10
BCOM	2	7	9
BSC	2	5	7
BLIS	4	5	9
BCA	1	5	6
MCA	3	2	5
MCOM	1	1	2
MEG	1		1
MHD	0	1	1

MLIS	1	0	1
MSO	1		1
TOTAL	19	33	52
Area			
19-25	7	26	33
above 25	12	7	19
Gender			
Female	8	11	19
Male	11	22	33
Area			
Rural	8	11	19
Urban	11	22	33
Marital Status			
Married	3	1	4
Unmarried	16	32	48

All the 19 employed students have confirmed that studying with IGNOU had helped in their employment, although only 10 have completed their studies successfully. Among the presently employed, most of them are above the age of 25 and married. Further the percentage of employed is higher among females than that of males.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have serious limitations as it is carried out at a micro-level with a very small sample size. The inferences drawn here are indicates possible trend and a detailed study is recommended at a macro level. Since the data on type and nature of disability among the sample studied are not readily available, no attempt was made to include them in the analysis.

It is suggested that students with disability needs support of life-skills programmes with limited written examination. Both at IGNOU headquarters and at all of its regional centres creation of Special Access Cell to handle the needs of students with disability is recommended. Such a Cell will identify the potential learners, their individual requirements, access devices required and sources of funding their studies. The Special Access Cell can ensure timely support to these students in guiding selection of programme of study and courses, providing study material, audio and video CDs, personal counseling on study skills, submission of assignments through e-mail, special arrangements for writing exam and for completing practical/lab courses.

Close to 40% of the sample studied did register for all year of study but could not successfully complete. Thus, full database, including current address and contact numbers of the enrolled students with disability is need of the hour to keep in touch with them and motivate them to complete their studies. Provision of information on assistive devices, as multimedia presentations in audio and video CDs, for enrolled students with disability would also facilitate successful completion of their studies. Availability of Text based Courseware in CDs or on internet can facilitate visually impaired to access the enlarged text on screen. In summary, the study recommends for a mechanism, like Special Access Cell, which will exclusively do the follow-up of students with disabilities, both prospective and enrolled, and extend all possible services for successful completion of their studies.

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