Challenges and Opportunities created by Covid-19 for ODL:

A case study of IGNOU

Dr. Pravat Kumar Jena
Assistant Regional Director,
IGNOU Regional Centre, C-1, Institutional Area, Bhubaneswa-751013.
Email - pravat@ignou.ac.in

Abstract: *The pandemic Covid-19 came as havoc for developing countries like India. It has significantly disrupted the education sector which is a critical determinant of a country's economic future. It has compelled the human society to maintain social distancing. It has made people mandatory to sit indoor and sitting idle indoor may lead to mental stress. Hence, it has created more challenges to keep people engaged and free from mental stress. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system is the best solution to meet the challenges of education during this pandemic situation of COVID-19. Every challenge is an opportunity. These challenges have also created opportunities for the educational institutes to strengthen their technological knowledge and infrastructure to tackle the Covid-19 like situation. Indian education system is more acquainted with face to face or physical teaching learning process. Most of educators and learners are not equipped with use of technology in education and there is also lack of practice and motivation towards use of technology in education which creates more challenges during pandemics. This article highlights different challenges and opportunities created by Covid-19 for ODL system of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The steps taken by IGNOU to meet the challenges by exploring various opportunities are pointed. Some tools and techniques for distance learning which can ensure the continuity of learning during the current pandemic are described. Some suggestions for handling the challenges created by Covid-19 by exploring various opportunities for ODL system are also pointed in the article.*

Key Words: *ODL, IGNOU, Covid-19, Challenges, Opportunities.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Many Governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions to control the spread of the Covid-19. With an increasing number lockdown situation around the world, more than 72% of the world's students population are not attending schools/colleges (UNESCO). Several other countries have implemented localized closures impacting millions of additional learners. During this time the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode is becoming more popular than the conventional mode of education. ODL is an excellent method of adult learners to possess the desired higher degree of qualification. The structure of ODL gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education. It is much more flexible and student centred in approach. It opens educational opportunity to the un-reached learners by allowing learners to learn in more convenient locations and times. It also enables learners to extend the period of their education to a lifelong learning process. The ODL mode of education plays an important role in meeting the needs of such persons who are in great demand of education but can't complete their education from the formal or regular system of education. They may be (Pravat, 2018):

- In-service persons who could not complete their educational qualifications due to certain reasons and want higher qualification without disturbing their jobs,
- Inferior from socio-economic conditions but want to enhance their educational status,
- Such persons who want to learn and earn simultaneously,
- Such persons who are residing far away from the big cities or in remote areas and do not have colleges and universities for higher education,
- Overflow from colleges/universities due to fixed number of seats or merit,
- Dropouts due to some personal reasons, now again motivated to study,
- Such persons who always want to add something new in their knowledge or update their knowledge or something training,
- Such women who are housewives but want to enhance their knowledge and earn degrees,
- Some very active retired persons who still want to know about their changing environment and update their knowledge and
- Such students who cannot fulfil the basic qualification for entrance of the university.

IGNOU which was established by an Act of Parliament in 1985 has national and international presence having Headquarters at New Delhi. Since then, the IGNOU has undergone rapid expansion and emerged as an international

institution in the field of ODL. It has tried to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by offering high-quality teaching through the ODL mode. In order to increase the student success rate as well as the student retention rate, the distance education institutions should strengthen their student support services system (Pravat, 2020). As IGNOU has been providing quality education, the learners must also be aware on the academic assessment system of IGNOU for successful completion their programmes (Pravat, 2019). IGNOU has been offering qualitative education through ODL mode since more than three decades. As per the provisions of the IGNOU Act (IGNOU profile), the University is to:

- Offer of degree, diploma and certificate programmes related to the needs of employment as necessary for building the economy of the country;
- Provide opportunities for higher education to a large cross-section of people, in particular the disadvantaged segments of society;
- Promote acquisition and up-gradation of knowledge and offer opportunities in the contests of innovation and research;
- Encourage an innovative system of university level education, flexible and open with regard to methods and pace of learning, combination of courses, eligibility for enrolment, age of entry, conduct of examination and delivery of the programmes.

IGNOU has a large number of programmes, ranging from purely academic to technical, professional and vocational at various levels leading to award of Competency Certificates, Diplomas, Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degree to successful candidates. Many of these programmes are modular in nature. Currently, this University offers more than 230 programmes through its 21 schools of studies with a network of 67 Regional Centres (these include 09 Regional Centres in the North-East Region, 06 Army Recognized Regional Centres, 04 Navy Recognized Regional Centres and one Assam Rifle Recognized Regional Centre), over 3000 Learner Support Centres (LSCs) and 29 overseas partner institutions (IGNOU profile). Over a period of three decades, the student strength of the University has grown rapidly and reached to the cumulative national and international student strength of more than 3.0 million. IGNOU, in a relatively short period, has made significant contribution towards higher education. It has also been conferred with Award of Excellence by the commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada. IGNOU has international character and offers its programmes in other countries, which include United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sultanate of Oman, Bahrain, Doha, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Maldives, Nepal, Kenya, Fiji, Caribbean Islands, Samoa, Malaysia, Krgystan, Singapore and Ghana, among others. The University also offers its Distance Education Programmes in collaboration with UNESCO and International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa, in Ethopia, Liberia, Madagascar, Ghana, whereas, education programme in Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, Seychelles, Jamaica, Malawi and Belize are being offered through an agreement signed with Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The University plays an active role in SAARC consortium for Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) and Global Mega Universities Network (GMUNET). Over the years, IGNOU has been satisfying the country's expectations of providing education to the marginalized sections of the society. It provides free education to all jail inmates across the country. A larger number of students from SC/ST and other marginalized segments of the society are getting admission with concessional fees in various programmes of the university. In order to reach to the unreached part of the society, the University has been establishing LSCs in several educationally and economically backward areas with remote and rural background. The student support services at IGNOU are managed through the Regional Services Division (RSD) with the support of Regional Centers (RCs) and LSCs. The RCs and LSCs provide facilities in terms of general and programme specific information, student enrolment, academic support relating to counselling, assignment evaluation, conducting examinations etc.

2. OBJECTIVES:
The objectives of the study are to:
- Enlighten various online tools/platforms adopted by IGNOU during this pandemic.
- Highlight some challenges created by Covid-19 for ODL system and put suggestions for improvement.
- Enlist various opportunities explored by ODL institutions to carry on their educational activities during the pandemic Covid-19.

3. METHODOLOGY:
The information presented in current study are collected from various authentic websites as it is risky to go out for data collection due to pandemic Covid-19. Some journals and e-contents relating to educational system during Covid-19 are studied to find out the problems associated with ODL system especially during pandemics. Measures taken by IGNOU to provide support services to the learners during the lockdown period for Covid-19 are collected from the website. Author has put some suggestions from his own experience to handle the challenges created by Covid-19 by exploring various opportunities of ODL system.

4. ONLINE TOOLS/PLATFORMS ADOPTED BY IGNOU:

Keeping in view of the increasing demand of education, the present conventional mode of education is unable to provide education to all. Some students are unable to gain higher studies just because their financial conditions do not allow them to continue their study. ODL is the most economical form of higher education. The ODL system has proved to be the alternative to the conventional system as it has the right potential to reach out to the large segment of the unreached, marginalized and the needy in a very cost effective manner. The ODL system has many advantages especially during the lockdown period. Some of the major reasons for utilising ODL system during pandemic Covid-19 are as follows:

- One can acquire knowledge staying at home and can maintain social distancing.
- Outbreak of Covid-19 can be minimised due to social distancing
- It offers highly effective learning environments
- It offers complementary interactive support that allows students to study 24/7 and work at their own pace
- It offers flexible scheduling
- It is available in any location, with an internet connection and students can attend using their devices (mobile, computers, tablets, etc.).
- Deals with real-time student monitoring as well as reporting
- Improves the image of institution by offering technological solutions that solve real problems
- Some emergency service personnel like police, doctor and nurses etc. who do not get much time to interact in online classes make use the recordings of classes and pursue their study during this pandemic.

IGNOU has developed an online system of education for the distance learners who would like to perform their studies by using internet based technologies. IGNOU has a dedicated online learning website http://www.ignouonline.ac.in to cater to the learning needs of learners (IGNOU online). Using this platform the learners can explore the links to access all learning resources available online. This website links to three important online resources like *Education Broadcast*, *Virtual Class* and *eGyanKosh*. There is also one iGRAM portal which is actively solving the queries of learners during this pandemic.

- *Education Broadcast* is a webcasting facility linking learners to educational channels *Gyanvani* and *GyanDhara*.
- *Virtual Class* provides links to all the online programmes of the University.
- *eGyanKosh* is a National Digital Repository to store, index, preserve, distribute and share the digital learning resources developed by the Open and Distance Learning Institutions in the country.
- *iGRAM* (http://igram.ignou.ac.in/) means IGNOU Grievance Redress And Management. It has been developed with the objective of quick resolution of the problems of learners. This platform helps the learners in addressing their problems in the shortest possible time through online mode.

5. SOME FREE ONLINE PLATFORMS THAT SUPPORT LIVE-VIDEO COMMUNICATION:

There are many live-video communication platforms are available in web, but some of the free online platforms (Google search) are as listed below which can be used by learners of all categories:

- **Zoom** – Cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, collaboration, chat and webinars.
- **Google Meet** – Video calls integrated with other Google's G-Suite tools. Video meeting recordings, Screen sharing, Join calls using Google Calendar
- **Skype** – Video and audio calls with talk, chat and collaboration features.
- **Facebook Live**- is a great fit for businesses, influencers, or individuals who are looking to broadcast demos, videos, or showcase their company culture while streaming live, followers on Facebook can comment and chat live, schedule videos ahead of time to gain excitement.
- **YouTube Live-**is a platform for demonstrating a product with live interaction, hosting an educational session to teach audience with screen sharing or using a whiteboard, having features with Location tags and advanced scheduling.
- **UberConference**- Unlimited Video and audio calls with talk, chat and collaboration features
- **FreeConference is** ideal for smaller teams or meetings, feature include Screen sharing, Document sharing, Text sharing etc.
- **Dingtalk** – Communication platform that supports video conferencing, task and calendar management, attendance tracking and instant messaging.
- **Lark** – Collaboration suite of interconnected tools, including chat, calendar, creation and cloud storage, in Japanese, Korean, Italian and English
- **Teams** – Chat, meet, call and collaboration features integrated with Microsoft Office software.

- **TrueConf Online-**HD video with Collaboration tools (screen sharing, remote desktop control, recorded calls, file transfer and shared virtual whiteboard)
- **Slack Video Calls-** is good for teams looking for a supplementary video calling solution for small teams, features include individual calls and messenger services
- **Lifesize Go-** No restrictions on meeting length, preferred for small group conversations.

6. CHALLENGES CREATED BY COVID-19 FOR ODL:

Pandemic Covid-19 has created many challenges for all stakeholders of ODL especially during the lockdown periods which are as listed below:

- **Computer literacy**: During lockdown period for Covid-19, the educational institutions are depending mostly on use of online platforms which becomes very difficult for the computer illiterate learners to manage.
- **Technical issues**: Some learners may face difficulty to use online platforms due to poor technical knowledge in using gadgets and some may suffer due to poor internet connectivity in their locality.
- **Social Status**: Some financially weaker section may not afford the purchase the required technical gadgets or high speed internet services for online learning. Some disadvantaged learners may also suffer in accessing online support services provided by the educational institutions during the pandemics.
- **Self motivation**: Motivation of the learners is highly necessary to explore the facilities of using online support services during the pandemics which is lacking in some learners.
- **Missing pre-admission counselling**: Learners are not getting support and guidance for taking admission in different programmes of IGNOU. Most of the learners are habituated with the traditional learning system and are not much aware of the distance learning system. So, pre-admission counselling is highly necessary for them in order to choose the right programme as per their requirement and eligibility. Learners are not able to visit the LSCs or RCs physically to clear their queries relating to admission due to the lockdown imposed for Covid-19.
- **Missing admission counselling:** As the learners are unable to reach RCs/LSCs physically due to lock down, they are not able to clear their doubts regarding all required formalities for taking admission and sometimes even fail to know about any shortcomings in their application forms for admission.
- **Missing hard copies of study materials:** Usually, hard copies of study materials are delivered to the address of the learners by post or by courier services after the completion of admission. Due to lockdown throughout the country, learners are not getting the hard copies of the study materials and facing difficulty.
- **Missing face to face Induction meetings**: Induction meeting is the first introduction meeting which are conducted at the LSCs to create awareness among fresh learners regarding the rules and formalities of the University in order to complete their programme successfully. Due to lockdown for Covid-19, learners are missing face to face induction meetings.
- **Missing face to face counselling classes**: The LSCs are remaining closed in lockdown period and the counsellors are also unable to join their institutions as a result of which learners are missing face to face counselling sessions.
- **Difficulty in assignment submission**: Learners are unable to submit their hand written assignment responses at LSCs before appearing Term-End-Examination (TEE) due to lockdown.
- **Difficulty in conducting TEE**: Generally IGNOU conducts TEEs twice a year during June and December. But, due to Covid-19, the institutions are closed which has created another hindrance for IGNOU to conduct the forthcoming TEE in June 2020 and the matter is still in dilemma.
- **Difficulty in conducting Orientation meetings**: RCs are unable to conduct orientation meetings with coordinators of all LSCs in face to face mode due to lockdown. RCs are also unable to conduct orientation meetings with counsellors of different courses in Face to Face mode due to lockdown.

7. OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY COVID-19 FOR ODL:

Most of RCs of IGNOU are facing the above listed challenges and different RCs met those challenges in various ways. Pandemic Covid-19 has created many opportunities for ODL especially during the lockdown period which may be pointed as below:

- **Education through ODL**: Due to the pandemic Covid-19, learners are taking more interest to pursue their learning through ODL. It has also Created Importance of Open Educational Resources (OERs)
- **Digital Learning:** Opened door for Mobile learning, online learning, and live video-conferencing. Digital literacy rate of educators and learners is also enhanced

- **Offering Online programmes**: Different educational institutions are exploring to offer many online programmes at this time of pandemics. IGNOU is also offering several online programmes with affordable access to quality education for anyone, anytime and anywhere.

- **Conducting Online Admission process**: Many ODL institutes are trying to provide online admission facility during this pandemic. In IGNOU, all Fresh admission and Re-Registration processes are done through online mode for most of the programme which facilitates the learner to stay home during this pandemic.

- **Affluent use of electronic media for sharing information**: Most of the admission related queries are resolved through e-mail, SMS, phone calls and using different social Medias like WhatsApp or Facebook.

- **Explored the use of soft copies of the study materials**: All fresh learners are informed through e-mail to follow the softcopies of study materials which can be downloaded from e-gyankosh of IGNOU by visiting the site http://egyankosh.ac.in/ and learners are advised by SMS and e-mail to utilise the downloaded study materials till the hard copies reached their address after end of lockdown.

- **Explored the idea of Online Induction meeting**: During lockdown, RC has been conducting online Induction meetings for all the active LSCs on different dates. All academics of RCs involve themselves actively in the online induction meetings and address the new learners. The coordinators and counsellors of the LSCs also take part in the meetings and interact with new learners.

- **Conducting online counselling**: Counselling classes are being conducted for different courses using some free video conferencing tools like Zoom, Google Meet etc. RCs are receiving overwhelming responses from learners for online classes.

- **Storage of recordings in web**: Recordings of online counselling classes are saved in IGNOU website, Google drive and uploaded in YouTube channels by different RCs for reference of learners as per their convenience.

- **Submitting assignments online**: RCs of IGNOU have opened dedicated e-mail accounts and learners have been informed to send scan copies of assignment responses to the dedicated e-mail. After receiving the scan copies of assignment responses those are sent to the course wise approved counsellors/evaluators for evaluation.

- **Conducting online meetings**: RC has been conducting online orientation meetings with coordinators of all LSCs and counsellors of different courses using video conferencing tools from time to time during the lockdown period.

- **World wide exposure**: Educators and learners are getting an opportunity to interact with peers from around the world.

8. SUGGESTIONS:

Pandemic Covid-19 has created many challenges and opportunities in the field of ODL for all stakeholders. It is not so easy to overcome those challenges but all are trying their best and exploring better opportunities also. Some of the suggestions to handle issues created by Covid-19 are as pointed below:

- Online platforms with enhanced safety and safeguarding measures, especially for virtual learning tools should be ensured. The devices must have the latest software updates and antivirus programs otherwise the security of personal data may be compromised as one can hack the digital devices. Government/educational institutions should also create awareness on online education with safety measures for learners and take measures to create awareness on cyber security

- When there is an option of using online platform for their study at home, some of them are unable to utilise online platform of education. Not all learners have the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to keep themselves safe online. Spending more time on virtual platforms may leave learners vulnerable to online sexual exploitation also. So, Government/educational institutions should take necessary steps to train all stakeholders of education on online learning platform to tackle such crisis of lockdown during any pandemics.

- Learners from low-income families and disadvantaged groups are the more likely to suffer during online learning as they may not afford high-speed internet connection and required technical gadgets. It widens gap between privileged and unprivileged learners. Government/educational institutions should adopt the policy to provide free internet and free digital gadgets to all learners in order to encourage online learning as a result of which people would get engaged themselves during lockdown and remain safe from pandemics.

- Some learners may not receive prior information on online class or induction meeting schedule leading to missing of the online events. So, the institutions should take proper step to send prior information to the learner on any online support services.

- As most of the practical courses can not be conducted online, conduct of practical classes through virtual lab may be facilitated by the educational institutions.
- Institutions should provide proper academic and psychological support to the students during the pandemic.
- Integrated technology platform should be created for learners which may include digital services, web based services and broad cast based services so that learners can use as per their own choices.

9. CONCLUSIONS:

ODL is a very good platform to keep learners/educators engaged and safe by maintaining social distancing during the lockdown period for Covid-19. ODL system utilises various applications of the internet to distribute classroom materials and help learners and educators interact with one another. Using the various technologies educators can provide a more interactive distance learning experience by delivering real-time, synchronous video conferencing. Though the outbreak of Covid-19 has created many challenges for education including ODL system, many educational institutions have accepted the challenges and trying their best to provide seamless support services to the learners exploring better opportunities. Every challenge is an opportunity. Though Covid-19 has created many challenges, it has induced the educational institutions to explore better opportunities of learning using different technologies. IGNOU has been tackling all challenges created by Covid-19 and providing effective support services through online mode for the benefit of stakeholders of ODL at the time of crisis. Government/educational institutions should also adopt the policy to provide free internet and free digital gadgets to all learners in order to encourage online learning as a result of which people would get engaged during lockdown and utilise the educational opportunities. Further in-depth research may be undertaken to study the effect of Covid-19 on education system.

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