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An Overview of the Role of Distance Education in India's Educational System before and after COVID-19

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Abstract: *Distance education in India has played a significant role in higher education. The content or instruction delivery method has changed from ancient times to the present. At present, students are enriched with the high-tech infrastructure of technology as well as ICT tools. Distance education in India has gained popularity since 1960, after the revolution of technology and the reformation of higher education. By using this advanced technology, learners who could not get higher education can now access it. IGNOU, the open distance education university, is crucial in this field. Distance education enrollment increased by 7% from 2020 to 21 and from 2019 to 20. Most students for online programs come from Karnataka, Maharashtra, UP, Rajasthan, and Delhi. Between 2021 and 2022, enrolment in online education increased by 170 per cent, while open and distance learning (ODL) enrollment increased by 41.7 per cent, where Business Administration is the most popular U.G. program and MBA courses are the most popular P.G. program. 43% of women nationwide were enrolled in distance learning programs, according to the Distance Education Council's (DEC) 2009–10 study. This study intends to highlight the overall situation of distance education in India, which we faced before and after COVID-19. It aims to glimpse how distance education has grown rapidly in India.*

Key Words: *COVID-19, Distance Education, IGNOU, Online Learning, ODL, UGC, Higher Education.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Distance education, also known as distance learning, is a branch of education that focuses on instructional system design, technology, pedagogy, andragogy that work well together to deliver education to students. This allows students and teachers to communicate both synchronously and asynchronously. They are essentially an educational concept, a learning or teaching methodology strongly linked to specialized learning resources, and they have a distinct role for inexperienced teachers compared to experienced ones. Technology plays a crucial part in the educational process by acting as an intermediary to enable two-way communication between teachers and students for the students' learning process. In this day and age of universal education, all countries are beginning to embrace the concept of distance learning. With distance learning or education, education from a remote area is feasible. This concept first surfaced in Europe in the mid-1800s and eventually spread to the US and other nations. When remote learning began, it used the most significant technology available at the time—the mail system—to give educational possibilities to people who wanted to learn but could not attend traditional institutions. The groups that profited most from correspondence education were women, professionals, people with physical disabilities, and people living in areas lacking institutions. Depending on the nation, numerous terms are used to describe distance education. Other languages may refer to these as correspondence education (UK), external studies, or "off-campus" in Australia; in Spanish, Educacion a Distancia; in German, Fernstudium or Fernunterricht; and Portuguese, Teleducacao. In New Zealand, distance education is referred to as "extra-mural" (*Distance Education System INDIA.Pdf*, n.d.), (Understanding Open and Distance Education, 2010). The way remote education is communicated has also changed due to technological advancements. Television and radio are two important new communication media created in the 1940s and 1920s, respectively, and are now widely utilised in remote learning. Using these platforms, educators broadcast several educational programs to millions of pupils. The progress of computer technology played a role in the development of remote education by facilitating communication between educators and students. Nowadays, it's customary to learn virtually, and access to distant learning requires the Internet. Thus, remote learning has evolved into a completely new concept for teaching those unable or unwilling to study in typical classroom settings, rather than just an instructional tool. Most remote learning schools now provide a wide range of online courses that can be accessed online. It was hardly twenty years after India

had become independent, and a strategy was needed to decide on the best course of action. It is necessary to look into a few issues.

The government of India eventually concentrated on two areas as it sought to strengthen the country from the ground up: industry and higher education. In 1960, India launched its first remote education program for higher education. Some academics argue that it originated in India during the time of Ekalavya and provides a more flexible and economical method of instruction, especially in the country's higher education system. A young man from a lower caste named Ekalavya wanted to learn the best archery methods from a famous teacher, but he was rejected because of his caste. He created a clay mud figure of the guru and started practicing. One day, while exercising, he became sidetracked upon hearing a dog bark. He shot the dog's mouth with arrows to stop it from opening. Guru Dronacharya was stunned to see the archer's skill and immediately called for Ekalavya. He asked to know the identity of the mentor who had trained him, and Ekalavya showed him a clay figure of the Guru. The life and achievements of Ekalavya serve as an example of the modern "distance education" model of education. Paper materials were the only item that immediately came to mind when online learning was initially presented. However, the current definition of distance education mandates using non-print media such as computers, laptops, radios, televisions, recorded lectures in MPEG and AVI formats on CDs and DVDs, and additional materials. Furthermore, projectors, video conferencing, and online interactive sessions between students and teachers are ways in which self-learning materials (SLM) can be accessible. Dual-mode institutions are the names of these types of establishments (Understanding Open and Distance Education, 2010).

2. METHODOLOGY:

Data from various government sources, online e-journals, and books follow this descriptive-analytical study. This study was completed after reviewing the data carefully and analysing educational reports and records. Therefore, relevant data and information from both primary and secondary sources are collected to achieve the study's objectives.

3. DISTANCE EDUCATION: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE TO DATE:

Over 2.8 million students were served by 12 open universities, including the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and 106 dual-mode university distance education facilities nationwide 2005. Nine universities offer Distance learning programmes, 127 dual-mode universities, and 13 state-open universities. IGNOU is the largest of these, having admitted 2.5 million students. Approximately 1.3 million students enroll in different courses at these universities and establishments annually. This is a rapid and affordable method of raising college enrolment (IGNOU Annual Report 2022-23 Eng, 2023).

4. PRE-COVID DISTANCE EDUCATION IN INDIA (2012-2020):

45 universities, including four deemed universities that provide related degrees in Distance education. In its orders dated December 29, 2012, and February 5, 2014, the Ministry of Human Resource Development claims to have issued guidelines under Section 20 (1) of the UGC Act, 1956, regarding recognition, maintenance of standards, and regulation concerning distance education programmes offered by higher education institutions. The instructions included, among other things:

- Universities and other institutions must request approval from UGC to undertake Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes, as UGC will regulate these activities.
- UGC will create rules to ensure that ODL programmes adhere to standards and norms.
- UGC will employ former DEC employees in coordination with IGNOU to provide the physical infrastructure and workforce required to carry out the regulatory duties.
- As soon as DEC is disbanded, UGC will take over as the organization responsible for overseeing ODL programmes.

In pursuance of the above directions, the UGC has taken several measures, including the following-

- The UGC established a panel of experts led by Professor N.R. Madhava Menon to draft suitable guidelines for online learning administration in India. Nov. 2013 saw this committee turn in its findings to the UGC. A public domain was established for the report. The Commission then reviewed the Regulation, which had been developed by the Distance Education Bureau, during its meeting on January 10, 2014. The amended rules were forwarded to the Ministry of HRD for approval or acquiescence based on the modifications recommended by the Commission.
- By its order dated May 31, 2013, the UGC made temporary arrangements for the work related to the recognition grant for the distance education programmes. To this end, the UGC has assumed the former Distance Education Council (DEC) officials on a "deemed deputation" basis, with orders to follow. In addition, the UGC has

proposed to the Ministry of HRD that academic and non-academic positions within the UGC be established to carry out ODL's regulatory duties.

- In addition, the UGC requested that universities make sure that no new affiliation or approval is given to any new centre for ODL programmes or courses until the new regulations are notified in a letter dated May 28, 2013, which addressed the repeal of Section 20 of the IGNOU Act and the transfer of ODL's regulatory responsibilities from IGNOU to UGC.
- A public notice dated June 27, 2013, concerning courses, study centers, off-campus activities, and the territorial jurisdiction of universities has also been released by the UGC. The aforementioned public notice addresses some significant issues regarding the authority of universities, considered universities, and universities that provide distance learning programmes.
- The UGC established the procedure for handling institutions using open-distance learning until the new regulations were developed or announced in its June 17, 2013, notifications. It was determined, among other things, that the current DEC rules will control the decision-making process for approving ODL programmes until the UGC notifies the applicant of the new regulations.

Under the direction of Prof. Mohammad Mian, Vice Chancellor of MANUU, Hyderabad, and with Prof. Hari Chandan, Director of the Institute of Distance Education, University of Mumbai, as a member, the UGC established an Expert Committee to provide recommendations on all applications that were pending with the former DEC. This committee has convened five times and provided recommendations regarding the outstanding petitions and other issues regarding the approval or recognition. On July 31, 2013, the Commission met and discussed the recommendations from the Expert Committee's first three meetings. The Committee on Distance Education deliberated on the proposals made by the Expert Committee at its fourth and fifth meetings. Two Commission Members, Prof. DN Reddy, Dr VS Chauhan, and SHRI Praveen Prakash, JS (TEL), MHRD, comprised the Distance Education Committee, which was established by the Commission to review the Expert Committee's recommendations and make all decisions regarding distance education on the Commission's behalf. The Distance Education Committee has only convened twice, compared to five meetings for the Expert Committee. The UGC appointed an Expert Committee for Financial Assistance to ODL Institutions, chaired by Prof. H. P. Dikshit, to oversee the distribution of funds from the Ministry of HRD to state-open universities and other institutions offering distance education programmes. This was done as part of the work done by the former DEC. The committee held three sessions to authorize the grant release after inviting financial assistance submissions from the ODL institutions. Number of open universities and roughly 45 directors of dual-mode universities' distance learning in 2013–14. The universities received funding from the IGNOU funds that the Ministry of HRD had made available for this purpose (IGNOU Annual Report 2022-23 Eng, 2023).

5. POST-COVID DISTANCE EDUCATION IN INDIA:

Enrollment in higher education increased to 4.14 crore, crossing the 4-crore mark for the first time, an increase of 7.5 per cent from 2019–20 and 21 per cent from 2014–15. Enrollment in distance education has increased by 7 per cent from 2020 to 21 and from 2019 to 20. According to data accessed exclusively by TOI, the majority of students for online programmes come from Karnataka, Maharashtra, UP, Rajasthan, and Delhi. ODL's highest enrolments are from Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and West Bengal. Males and general category students form most of the online and ODL programmes offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) in India. Between 2021 and 2022, enrollment in online education increased by 170 per cent, while open and distance learning (ODL) enrollment increased by 41.7 per cent, setting a new record for new enrollment in non-physical modes. 20. 3 lakh Indian students chose ODL in 2021–2022, up from 14. 6 lakh in 2020–21. The overall number of students enrolled in online courses, including international students, increased from 25,905 to 70,023 throughout that time (IGNOU Annual Report 2022-23 Eng, 2023). As of October 17, 2022, 66 HEIs are approved by UGC as having the ability to provide 371 programs, comprising 235 postgraduate and 136 undergraduate online courses. Regarding courses, the Bachelor of Business Administration is the most popular undergraduate program with the largest enrolment (13.764), while MBA courses are the most popular postgraduate program with 28,956 enrolments. Guyana, the United Arab Emirates, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, and the United States have all participated in online projects not limited by national borders. Moreover, 38 per cent more HEIs offered online courses, going from 42 in 2020–21 to 58 in 21–22. Many students who cannot enroll in person at a college or university have a window of opportunity thanks to online education. UGC Chairman States enrollment will increase even more once the National Digital University and its flexible online education policies are announced. Following the volatile online education business in India. Thus, currently and going forward, the income from online learning as a fellow:

- In 2024, the online education market is expected to generate US$6.71 billion in revenue.

- By 2029, revenue is predicted to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 23.06%, translating into a market volume of US$18.94 billion.
- In 2024, the online learning platform industry is expected to generate US$5.50 billion in revenue.
- The United States will produce the most revenue globally, with US$87.51 billion 2024.
- It is projected that by 2029, there will be 309.1 million users in the online education sector.
- By 2024, the market for online education will have 13.2% of its users
- The online education market's average revenue per user (ARPU) will reach US$35.36 in 2024 (*Education: Government Initiatives for Digital Education in India | - Times of India*, 2022).

6. ONLINE LEARNERS BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER COVID:

These figures help us to comprehend the significant increase in online learning platforms following COVID-19, from 1.96 billion USD in 2019 to 6.71 billion USD in 2024. Similarly, the percentage of people using online learning platforms climbed from 3.3% in 2019 to 12.1% in 2024. Conversely, there will be a slight increase in online professional credentials and university education from 0.2 in 2019 to 0.6 in 2024. Concerning the Budget for the previous year (2023–24), the education and higher education sector received only roughly 2.9% of the nation's GDP. The statistics above show that South India has seen a significant increase in demand for distance learning compared to the rest of the nation. The fact that Indian remote education institutions differ from one another is also noteworthy. North East fares significantly worse than South East India, which has a perfect score. The ODL system accounts for 22% of all higher education enrollments. However, the trend for remote learning enrollment has generally risen. 43% of women nationwide were enrolled in distance learning programmes, according to the Distance Education Council's (DEC) 2009–10 study. Enrollment in distance education has grown along with the number of these institutions since the 1990s.

7. CONCLUSION:

Distance education in India has evolved significantly from its 19th-century correspondence model to a digitally-driven landscape, aiming to expand educational access for underserved populations. The shift from a supplementary instructional tool to a comprehensive and flexible mode of learning has been driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-COVID data shows a 170% increase in online education enrollment and a 41.7% rise in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) enrollment, pushing overall higher education enrollment past the 4-crore mark for the first time. The shift in preferred programs, particularly in BBA and MBA courses, is a significant factor in this growth. The revenue projections for the online education market in India are robust, with regional disparities in uptake. Women remain significant beneficiaries, with a substantial percentage enrolled in distance learning programs.

5.1 Enrolment in higher education and distance education

1	Year	Universities/ colleges (percentage)	Distance education institutions (percentage)
2	1982-83	94.07	5.93
3	1987-88	90.45	9.55
4	1994-95	86.86	13.14
5	2014-15	88.86	11.14
6	2022-23	—	—

(Source: Various UGC Annual Reports; figures in parentheses indicate the enrolment in the open universities; Yadav & Panda (1999), All India Survey on Higher Education (2014-15)).

5.2 (Figure 1)

NUMBER OF ONLINE INSTITUTIONS UP 38%

Type of higher educational institutions (HEI)	No of total HEIs for online programmes	No of programmes for online	Student enrolment in 2021-22 for online programme		Total student enrolment for online programme
			Indian	International	
Central university	4	21	9,884	4	9,888
State university	17	119	6,041	64	6,105
Deemed to be university	30	159	35,353	1,507	36,860
Private university	12	46	18,745	802	72,400

Academic Year 2022-23 and onwards – As on 17.10.2022 66 higher educational institutions (HEIs) are recognised/entitled to offer 371 online programmes

COMPARATIVE STATUS	2020-21	2021-22	Increase %
No. of HEIs for online	42	58	38
No. of programmes for online	237	345	45.6
Indian enrolment for online	21,954	70,023	219
International enrolment for online	3,951	2,377	-39.8
Total enrolment (fresh admissions) for online	**25,905**	**70,023**	170.3
No. of HEIs for ODL	93	86	-7.5
No. of programmes for ODL	1,066	1,078	1.1
Total enrolment (fresh admissions) for ODL	**14,38,101**	**20,37,676**	41.7

2022

Country-wise top 5 countries' representation among international students

Online | Guyana, UAE, Nepal, Saudi Arabia & USA

ODL | ODL Education can be offered only within their territorial jurisdiction

State-wise top 5 states' representation among Indian students for online

Online | Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan & Delhi

ODL | Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat & West Bengal jurisdiction

Gender-wise break for online

Online | Males: 47449; Females: 24949; Transgender: 2

ODL | Males: 1161262; Females: 876349; Transgender: 65

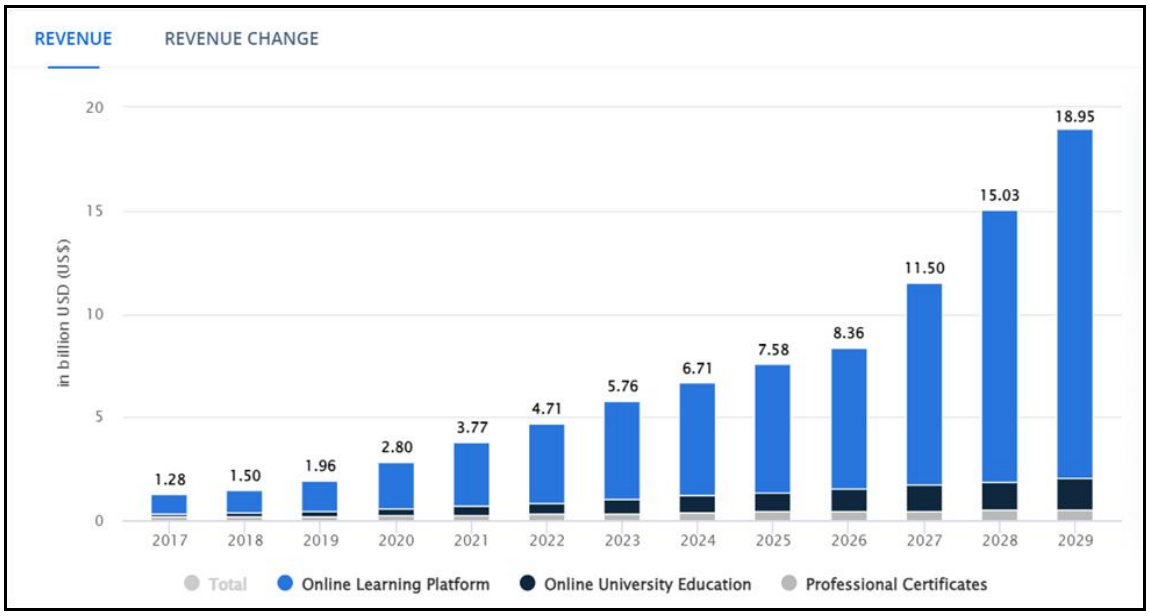
Category-wise break up for Online

Online | General: 55680 | EWS: 125 | SC: 2946 | ST: 1003 | OBC: 12565 | PwD: 81

ODL | General: 930589 | EWS: 27757 | SC: 272944 | ST: 113437 | OBC: 691536 | PwD: 503

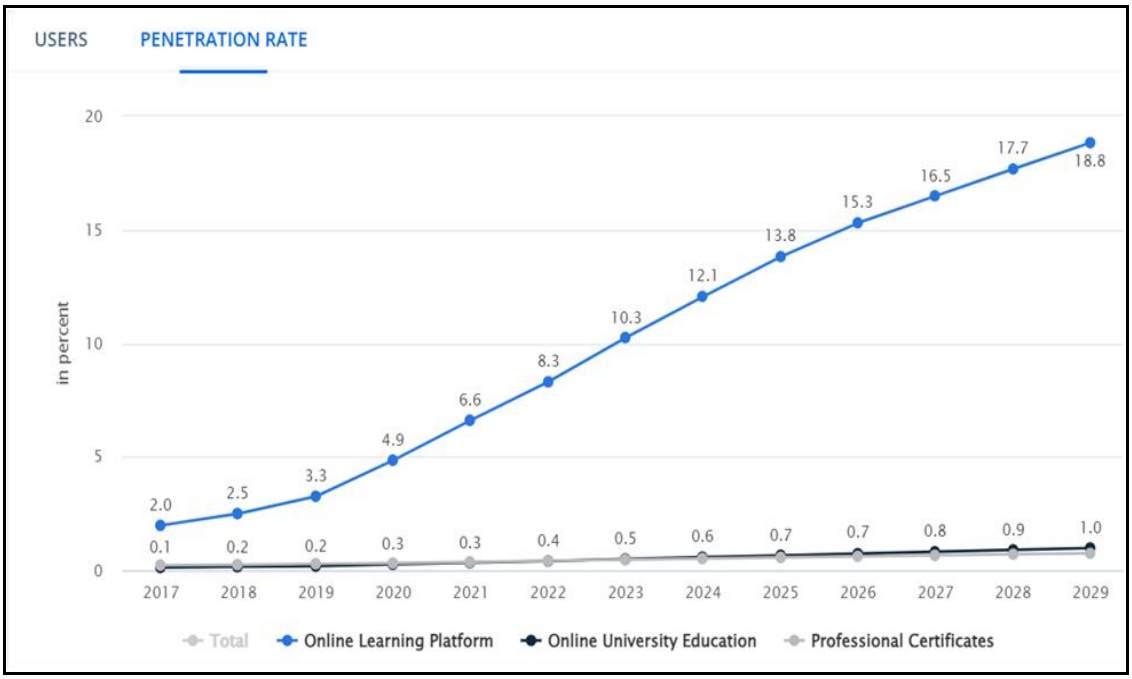
(Source: "Enrolment for Online Education up 170 per cent in 2022, Distance Learning 42 per cent," 2022)

5.3 Graphs of online education



Source: Statist Market Insights, March, 2024

5.4 Graphs of the online learning platform



(Source: Statist Market Insights, March, 2024)

5.5 Student enrolment data from various distance education universities & institutes

1	Name of the University/Institutes	Total Enrolment up to Dec.2010
2	Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi	3200000

3	YCM Open University, Nasik	2432000
4	Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad	465000
5	Delhi University, Delhi	322000
6	Tamil Nadu Open University, Chennai	250000
7	M.P. Bhoj University, Bhopal	205000
8	Sikkim Manipal University, Gangtok	185000
9	Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar	179000
10	Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad	169000
11	University of Madras	150000

(Source: From the respective websites of the universities & institutes)

5.6 Status of Distance Education (2010): An Indian Scenario

State	No. of DEIs/ CCIs	State	No. of DEIs/ CCIs
Andhra Pradesh	18	Maharashtra	24
Arunachal Pradesh	1	Meghalaya	2
Assam	4	Mizoram	1
Bihar	5	Nagaland	1
Chhattisgarh	4	Orissa	6
New Delhi	10	Pondicherry	1
Gujarat	5	Punjab	6
Haryana	8	Rajasthan	10
Himachal Pradesh	1	Sikkim	3
Jammu and Kashmir	2	Tamil Nadu	29
Karnataka	12	Tripura	2
Kerala	4	Uttar Pradesh	16
Madhya Pradesh	9	Uttarakhand	6
West Bengal	7	-	-

(Source: www.dec.ac.in)

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