Student Support Services (Ssss) In Open And Distance Learning Institutions Of Assam

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Introduction

The history of the Open & Distance Learning (ODL) education system in our country is now three decades old. In the phase of rapidly transformation in higher education in our country these universities have the common mandate to reach the disadvantaged group of the people in our society in terms of access and equity for higher education, particularly the distance and remote areas of the country. Two main factors have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning: the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining; and the technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance. As a force contributing to social and economic development, ODL is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis for the latter.

In Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, Student Support Services (SSS) play an instrumental role in making two-way communications possible and in the expansion of ODL system across the country. It is an important subsystem of ODL system. The term 'student support' means the range of human and nonhuman resources to guide and facilitate educational transaction. It complements and supplements the mass-produced instructional materials. The Student Support Service comprises activities of finalization of admission process, dispatch of course materials and post-admission support. Student support is a mechanism to help the learner to learn. In ODL system, multimedia, print, audio, video, radio, TV, teleconferencing and videoconferencing-instructional package, face-to-face counselling, continuous assessment and hands-on-experience constitute learner support.

Significance of the Study

Distance learners are isolated and independent in nature. They cannot get immediate clarification for their doubts that come up during their study. So, it is necessary to provide some support to the distance learners to guide them. The success of ODL highly depends on the support services provided by the system. Student support is a mechanism to help the learner to learn in the ODL system. This paper is an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of SSS provided by the ODL institutions of the state. The prime focus has been laid on Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University and Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Guwahati. This has been done keeping in view the geographical belongingness as well as their overall contribution towards the spread of ODL in the state. Review of these literatures reveals that, studies on Student Support Services are not adequate in the Indian context and thus paving for enough scope to further study in the field. An in-depth study on Leaner Support Services can focus on the real need of the learner and consequently on the real need of the institution. Thus, this study can be utilized for institutional monitoring and developmental purposes. Therefore, it was found to be necessary to carry out more studies in this area.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the paper are-

i.   To study the nature of Student Support Services provided by the various ODL Institutions of Assam.

ii.   To study the learners' view regarding Student Support Services provided by ODL Institutions of Assam.

Methodology of the Study

For the present study Descriptive Cum Survey method of Educational Research was used by the researcher.

Sample of the Study

For the present study the researcher selected 4 numbers of ODL institutions, 4 study centres, 500 learners, and 4 study centre coordinators from each ODL institutions of Assam as representative of the target population.

Analysis of the Study

i.   Student Support Services provided by the various ODL Institutions of Assam

Student Support Services provides academic and non-academic support to the learners in pursuing a programme through distance mode. Garrison (1989) observed that in distance education "support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction". The dominant feature of distance education is the physical and often temporal distance that separates the teacher and learner. Because distance learners are often placed in a unique situation in which neither teachers nor fellow learners are physically present to clarify, discuss, or provide feedback, effective distance education requires a sound learner support system (Gunawardena, 1992).

Common Learner Support Services of ODL Institutions of Assam:
- Information (face-to-face, through telephone, letters, TV, news-papers and internet).
- Academic and Non-Academic Counseling.
- Assignments.
- Study Centres.
- Library facility.
- Web-site.
- Dispatch of the materials by hand or by post.

Specific Student Support Services provided by the ODL Institutions of Assam:

The various SSS provided by different ODL Institutions of Assam are given in the Table-I:

Table- I: Specific Learner Support Services of ODL Institutions of Assam:

KKHSOU	IDOLGU	DDETU	DDEDU
Toll Free Facility	Several Telephone Lines	Induction Meeting	Only one Telephone and mobile numbers of the faculties and employees
Free education to the prisoners	Induction Meeting		Induction Meeting
Radio Broadcast Programme - Ekalabya	Scholarship-- according to the university rule		Scholarships -according to the university rule
Bulk SMS	Community Radio – Radio Luit only for 10 km radius		Computer-Lab with internet facility,
Community Radio- Jyan Taranga	Bulk SMS		Bulk SMS
Audio and Audio-Visual Programmes	SMS service		Radio Programme Gyanmalinee
Smart KKHOU Internet Radio	Multi –Media Support (under progress)		Multi-media CDs/DVDs
An Open Access Journals Search Engine (OAJSE)	e-portal		Mobile phone service specially for the Radio Broadcast
Learners Social Network Site	Discussion Forum		A magazine named Mohona
Special phone in programme			

    ii.   Learners' and Study Centre Coordinators' view regarding Student Support Services provided by ODL Institutions of Assam

Table- 2.: Showing the Percentage of Study Centre Coordinator and Learners' Responses in terms of the Curriculum and Study Materials Provided by the ODL Institutions of Assam

Statements	Percentage of Responses in terms of the Curriculum and Study Materials							
	Study Centre Coordinators (4 Nos)				Learners (500 Nos)			
Status of revision of the courses	Revised in every year	Revised in every two years	Revised in every three years	Not revised	Revised in every year	Revised in every two years	Revised in every three years	Not revised
	-	-	-	100% (10 numbers)	-	-	-	100% (500 numbers)
The study materials are dispatched to the students	By hand	By post		By online	By hand	By post		By online
	100%	-		-	96% (480 numbers)	-		4% (20 numbers)
Courses for which study materials are not available	Study materials are available for all courses				Study materials are available for all courses			
Timing of dispatching the study materials to the students	In the beginning of the session	During the session		On demand of the learners	In the beginning of the session	During the session		On demand of the learners
	80%	-		20%	95.2% (476 numbers)	-		4.8% (24 numbers)
The other types of supplementary materials provided to the learners (besides the study materials)	Reference books and guide books	E-books and e-resources		Enrichment/ Diagnostic materials	Reference books and guide books	E-books and e-resources		Enrichment/ Diagnostic materials
	100%			-	84.61% (423 numbers)	14.4% (72 numbers)		1% (5 numbers)
Persons involved in preparation of the study materials	Institution teachers/ counsellors	Outside Subject experts		Consultancy by agencies	Institution teachers/ counsellors	Outside Subject experts		Consultancy by agencies
	80%	20%		-	72% (360 numbers)	28% (140 numbers)		-

Interpretation: The table no. 2 shows the percentage of the study centre coordinator and learners' responses in respect of getting academic support provided by the ODL institutions of Assam. Regarding the status of revision of the courses, the concerned study revealed that in general form all the ODL Institutions existing in Assam like KKHSOU, IDOL (GU), DDETU and DDEDU almost all study centre coordinators and learners expressed that the courses are not revised. Whereas, in terms of despatching the study materials, all the study centre coordinators revealed that the study materials are despatched to the learners by hand whereas, 96% learners stated by hand and 4% viewed as by online.

Again, in respect of the availability of study materials, all the study centre coordinators and learners viewed that study materials are available for all the courses. Regarding the timing of despatching the study materials to the learners, 80% study centre coordinators stated as in the beginning of the session, whereas 20% stated as on the demand of the learners. On the other hand, 95.2% learners stated that study materials are despatched to the learners in the beginning of the session whereas, 4.8% learners stated as on the demand of the learners. In terms of availability of the supplementary materials besides the study materials, almost all the study centre coordinator opined that reference books, guide books, e-books and e-resources are available for the learners, whereas 84.61% learners stated about the availability of reference books and guide books, 14.4% about the e-books and e-resources whereas, only 1% learners stated about the availability of enrichment/diagnostic materials.

In the context of the above analysis, it is specified that in all the ODL institutions of Assam, so far as the academic support is concerned, the study materials are dispatched to the students by hand in the beginning of the session and different types of supplementary materials like reference books, guide books, e-books and e-resources are provided to the students for their support.

Table- 3.: Showing the Percentage of Study Centre Coordinator and Learners' Responses in terms of Evaluation, Reporting of Result and Record Maintenance by the ODL

Statements	Percentage of responses in terms of Evaluation, Reporting of Result and Record Maintenance							
	Study Centre Coordinators (4 Nos)				Learners (500 Nos)			
Which type of evaluation system is applicable?	Annual system of evaluation		Semester system of evaluation		Annual system of evaluation		Semester system of evaluation	
			100%				100% (500 numbers)	
Frequency of term end examination conducted in a year	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than three times	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than three times
		100% (10 numbers)				100% (500 numbers)		
Timing of the month conducting the term-end examination	No fixed months		Fixed months		No fixed months		Fixed months	
	40%		60%		45% (225 numbers)		55% (275 numbers)	
Type of evaluation practiced in the institution	Manual Evaluation		Computer based evaluation (online evaluation)		Computer based evaluation (without online evaluation)	Manual Evaluation	Computer based evaluation (online evaluation)	Computer based evaluation (without online evaluation)
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
	40%	-	60%	-	- / -	49.2% (246 numbers) / -	50.8% (254 numbers) / -	- / -
Whether the facilities are there in the institution	Re evaluation		Re checking of marks	Declaration of the results in time		Re evaluation	Re checking of marks	Declaration of the results in time
	Yes	No	Yes / No	Yes	No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
	60%	40%	100%	100%	-	57.6% (288 Numbers) / 42.4% (212 numbers)	100% (500) / 66.8% (334)	33.2% (166 numbers)
The examination result is reported to the students	Published through website		Published by Media		Published in the institutional notice board	Published through website	Published by Media	Published in the institutional notice board
	Yes	No	Yes / No	Yes	No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
	40%	60%	- / 100%	100%	-	45.8% (229) / 54.2 (271)	100% (500) / 85% (425)	15% (75)
Different records relating to the students are maintained through	MIS		Manual Record		Through Rubrics and port-folios	MIS	Manual Record	Through Rubrics and port-folios
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
	20%	80%	100%	-	20% / 80%	26% (130) / 74% (370)	100% (500) / -	4% (20) / 96% (480)

Interpretation: The table no.3. indicates the percentage of the study centre coordinator and learners' responses in respect of evaluation, reporting of result and record maintenance by the ODL institutions of Assam. In terms of the which evaluation system is applicable to different courses, the concerned study revealed that in general form all the ODL Institutions existing in Assam like KKHSOU, IDOL (GU), DDETU and DDEDU almost all the study centre coordinator and learners expressed that semester system of evaluation is applicable in the ODL institutions. Likewise, all the study centre coordinators and learners revealed that the term end examination is conducted twice in a year. Again, in terms of the timing of the month for conducting the term-end examinations, 40% study centre coordinators viewed that no fixed month, whereas 60% stated that there is a fixed month for

conducting the term-end examination. Besides, 45% learners revealed that there is no fixed month for conducting the term-end examination whereas 55% learners stated that the term examination is conducted in a fixed month.

On the other-hand, regarding the type of evaluation practiced in the institution, 40% study centre coordinator opined as manual evaluation procedure, and 60% viewed as computer-based evaluation (online evaluation) is done. Furthermore, 49.2% learners viewed as manual evaluation is practiced, whereas 50.8% learners stated as computer-based evaluation (online evaluation) is done in their respective institutions. Again, regarding the re-evaluation facilities provided by the ODL institutions, 60% study centre coordinators stated positively and 40% opined negatively, whereas 57.6% learners stated positively and 42.4% learners viewed that there is no facility for re-evaluation of their answer script in their respective institutions. In respect of the declaration of the results in time, all the study centre coordinators stated positively but on the other hand 66.8% learners stated that the examination result is always declared in time whereas, 33.2% learners viewed negatively.

Regarding the reporting of the examination result, 40% study centre coordinators opined that examination result is published through website and 60% stated that examination result is not published in the website. On the contrary, almost all the study centre coordinator stated that examination result is published in the institutional website and it is not published by the media. 45.8% learners viewed that examination result is reported to the students through website whereas 54.2% opined negatively. Again, 85% learners stated that examination result is reported through institutional notice board whereas, 15% learners stated negatively. With regard to the maintenance of different records relating to the students, 20% study centre coordinators stated that with the help of MIS and rubrics and port-folios the records of each and every student is well maintained whereas 80% study centre coordinators stated negatively; but almost all the study centre coordinator and learners stated that different records of the students are well maintained manually. On the other hand, 26% learners viewed that through MIS the student record is maintained whereas 74% learners opined negatively; 4% learners also stated that different records relating to the students are well-maintained through rubrics and port-folios whereas 96% learners stated negatively.

With reference to the above analysis, it is indicated that in all the ODL institutions of Assam, so far as the academic support is concerned, semester system of evaluation is prevailing in all the institutions and the term end examination conducted twice in a year. Moreover, the institutions practiced computer-based evaluation more than the manual evaluation. This might be because the computer-based evaluation takes less time compared to the manual evaluation. On the other hand, most of the institutions maintained manual records for keeping different records relating to the students rather than MIS and rubrics and port-folios.

Table- 4.: Showing the Percentage of Study Centre Coordinator and Learners' Responses in terms of Multimedia Facilities provided by the ODL

Statements	Percentage of responses in terms of Multimedia Facilities Provided by the ODL											
	Study Centre Coordinators (4 Nos)						Learners (500 Nos)					
Whether these multimedia accessories available in the institution	Computer and printer	Xerox	Radio/ T. V	Video facility	Multimedia projector	Smart classroom	Computer and printer	Xerox	Radio/ T. V	Video facility	Multimedia projector	Smart classroom
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	80%	100% (500)	80% (400)	100% (500)	100% (500)	86% (430)	84% (420)
Which of the multimedia-based learning is practicing in the institution	Audio conferencing-based learning	Video conferencing-based learning / Video conferencing-based learning	Mobile based Learning		Online learning/ Digital learning	Smart classroom/Digital classroom-based learning	Audio conferencing-based learning	Video conferencing-based learning	Mobile based learning		Online learning/ Digital learning	Smart classroom/ Digital classroom-based learning
	100%	80%	80%		100%	80%	53% (265)	60% (300)	94% (470)		100% (500)	75% (375)

Interpretation: The table no. 4. shows the percentage of the study centre coordinator and learners' responses in respect of getting multimedia facilities provided by the ODL institutions of Assam. Regarding the availability of multimedia facilities in the ODL institutions, the concerned study revealed that in general form all the ODL Institutions existing in Assam like KKHSOU, IDOL (GU), DDETU and DDEDU about all the study centre coordinator expressed that different facilities like computer and printer facility, Xerox facility, radio/television facility, video facility, multimedia projector are available in the ODL institution, besides 80% study centre coordinator stated positively about smart classroom. Whereas almost all the learners viewed positively about different facilities available in their institution like computer and printer facility, radio/television facility, video facility on the other hand 80% learners viewed about availability of Xerox facility, 86% stated about multimedia projector facility and 84% stated about the availability of smart classroom facility in their respective institutions.

Again, in terms of multimedia-based learning practicing in the institution, about all the study centre coordinators viewed that audio-conferencing based learning and online learning/digital learning is prevailing in the institution, and 80% study centre coordinators stated about the video conferencing-based learning, mobile based learning and smart classroom/ Digital classroom-based learning prevailing in the institution. Besides, 53% learners stated about audio conferencing-based learning whereas 60% about video conferencing-based learning, 94% learners stated about mobile based learning and 75% about smart classroom-based learning whereas almost all the learners stated positively about practicing online learning in their respective institutions.

In the context of the above analysis, it is indicated that in all the ODL institutions of Assam, so far as the academic support is concerned, almost all multimedia facilities like computer and printer, xerox facility, radio/T.V., video facility, multimedia projector and smart classroom are available in most of the institutions. Besides, almost all the institutions practicing multimedia-based learning like audio conferencing, mobile based

learning and mobile based learning. This might be to facilitate learners, almost all the institutions made the multimedia accessories available in the institutions.

Table- 5: Showing the Percentage of Study Centre Coordinator and Learners' Responses in terms of Library Facilities of ODL

Statements	Percentage of responses in terms of Library Facilities					
	Study Centre Coordinators			Learners		
Whether the existing materials of the library are computerized	**Fully**	**Partially**		**Fully**		**Partially**
	20%	80%		40% (200 numbers)		60% (300 numbers)
Which is applicable to your institution	Students are issued the books from the library	Students are not issued the books from the library	Students are not using library	Students are issued the books from the library	Students are not issued the books from the library	Students are not using library
	20%	80%	-	45.2% (226 numbers)	54.8% (274 numbers)	-
Whether the learners have free access to books and journals in the library?	Yes	No		Yes		No
	100%	-		96% (480 numbers)		4% (20 numbers)
Whether library facility is adequate for meeting the learning needs?	Yes	No		Yes		No
	80%	20%		46.4% (232 numbers)		53.6% (268 numbers)

Interpretation: The table no. 5. indicates the percentage of the study centre coordinator and learners' responses in respect of getting library facilities provided by the ODL institutions of Assam. Regarding the library facilities provided by the ODL institution of the concerned study revealed that in general form all the ODL Institutions existing in Assam like KKHSOU, IDOL (GU), DDETU and DDEDU about 20% study centre coordinator expressed that the existing reading materials of the library is fully computerized and 80% stated that the reading materials are partially computerized whereas 40% learners stated as fully computerized and 60% viewed that the reading materials are partially computerized.

Likewise, 20% study centre coordinators revealed that students are issued the books from the library whereas 80% stated that students are not issued the books from the library. Besides that, 45.2% learners opined that students are issued the books whereas 54.8% learners stated that students are not issued the books from the library, moreover they have to study the books and materials only in the library of their respective centre/institution. Again, in terms of free access to books and journals for learners in the library, almost all the study centre coordinators and 96% learners viewed positively whereas 4% learners stated negatively and stated that they have to pay for using the library at the time of admission.

Regarding the adequacy of library facilities for meeting the learning needs, 80% study centre coordinator and 46.4% learners opined positively whereas 20% study centre coordinator and 53.6% learners stated negatively and stated that the number of books, journals and periodicals should be increased for meeting the requirements and demands of the learners.

With reference to the above analysis, it is indicated that in all the ODL institutions of Assam, so far as the academic support is concerned, the learners have free access to books and journals in the library and most of the institutions have adequate facilities in the library for meeting the learning needs from the study centre coordinators perspective but from learner's viewpoint the library facilities are not adequate and should be improved. This might be because books, journals and reference books may not be sufficient for the learners.

Conclusion

Learning happens at any place, any time and at any age. With the focus shifting towards a knowledge society and education to all, distance learning provides the best solution to build a human resource capital for a developing nation like India and a state tucked away in a corner like Assam. ODL system is a continuing education and a flexible alternate system with much more flexibility and ample opportunity. Though the ODL Institutions are growing rapidly and becoming popular among the 21st century learners but still there exists some problems in different areas of the ODL system. What is needed today is a concentrated effort by the academicians, policy planners and administrators to create a scientific base so that distance education may emerge as an effective and prestigious alternative to formal education and that its vast potentialities may be harnessed for individual and social welfare. In this study, we have found that as an ODL institution KKHSOU provides very strong learner support services while compared to the other ODL institutions of Assam. Most of the learners and study centre coordinators of Directorate of Distance Education are overall satisfied regarding the receipt of study materials and information, pre-admission counselling, Induction meeting, Self-Learning Materials, the Counselling Sessions and the dealings of the Officials of DDE, DU in response to their queries. The Induction Meeting has a noticeable positive impact on the reading of study materials before attending the counselling sessions. Some non-academic counselling sessions should be provided to the learners regarding the availability of the various supports of the Directorate as a significant majority of the learners were not aware about the various supports provided by the Directorate.

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