

THE ASSESSMENT OF GRIEVANCES OF ODL LEARNERS DURING COVID 19 -AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Introduction:

The Corona-virus occurrence is a human tragedy and causing a huge impact on people's lives & career. COVID -19 is having a significant impact on open and distance education institutions and learners.

The success of open & distance learning is based on a three-way affiliation between the learner, academic counsellors and technology. To make the distance education as more successful one, University undertakes several welfare measures & provides the effective student support services. Because, a satisfied student is an ambassador of the educational institution in the society.

The present study is an attempt to assess the reasons for emergence of grievances and provide feasible ways to resolve during the COVID 19 pandemic situation.

Grievances Redressal Regulations:

“The University Grants Commission (UGC) Grievance Redressal Regulations, 2012 prescribes for well-defined systems and procedures for redressal of grievances of aggrieved students in Universities and Colleges. These regulations are mandatory for implementation by all Universities/affiliated Colleges in India. UGC issues directions to Universities, from time to time, to effectively implement grievance redressal regulations” (Source: UGC Regulations in 2012 in Official Gazette of India publication on 23 March 2013)

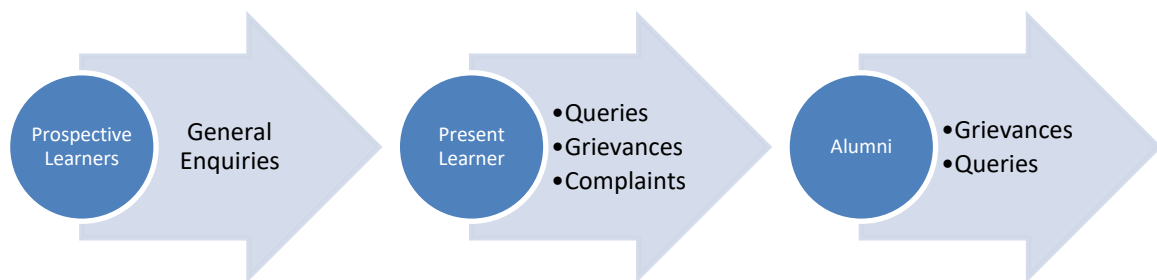
Role of Nodal Officer in Open & Distance Education Universities:

The Nodal Officer is the link between the ODL learners and the University. The activities of Nodal Officer include receipt of the representations from the learners, processing to concerned sections and the actions taken on the various issues.

The major challenge of Nodal Officer of Grievance Cell is , he has to depend on staff of various other sections pertain to different academic activities namely, admissions related, exam related, convocation related, project related, online portal related, study material related etc., So, processing and resolving the grievances in stipulated time is the biggest challenge of the Nodal Officers.

Nature of Student Representations:

The study related queries & grievances may be received from prospective learners, present learners & alumni in various contexts. The following diagram shows the different representations received by the University.



Source: Dr S Radha

Why grievances emerge?

The grievances emerge because of internal reasons and external reasons especially during COVID 19 pandemic situation. The online learning facilities offered by University & Online learning facilities available with learners to access these facilities are main reasons for emergence of queries and grievances. The following diagram shows the different reasons for emergence of grievances.



Source: Dr S Radha

It is also noticed during the monitoring visits that, some of the academic counsellors are not well versed in usage of ICT oriented counselling. Some academic counsellors are projecting note books, IGNOU study material and mobile phones and explaining. Some study centres, single academic counsellor is conducting counselling session for different courses. So, the academic counsellors are also must be well-versed to use the digital infrastructure and digital technology to train the students in their respective fields to provide effective counselling's.

From learner point of view, devices/tools available for learning purpose, internet connectivity in rural areas, technology skills of learners, learning attitude of the learner during lockdown period, time management etc., plays a vital role in effective digital learning. Hence, it is a collaborative responsibility of the University & LSCs to provide moral support and continuous follow up of the learners to keep them active academically.

Some of the reasons causing the emergence of various representations of ODL learners are discussed below.

1. Under ODL system, learner need to be pro-active and to pre-plan his studies through the help of study materials. Most of the queries /grievances are taking place due to the ignorance of learners. Many a times, the learners are lacking in touch with the Programme Guides, Study centers and Academic Counsellors therefore unable to fulfill the requirements of the Course. Self-evaluation plays a major role in ODL, where the learners are not attempting to solve self exercises, facing difficulties during examinations.
2. Most of the ODL learners are working professional, and not verifying the registration status or other services in IGNOU website and contact the Regional Centre after expiry of validity and request for permission to complete the Programme.
3. Another learner skill deficiency is age group of distance learners. Particularly, it is noticed that, most of the learners, who are above 40 years age are not comfortable in to scan and submit the assignments through emails. Most of middle age and above middle age learners are not comfortable in attending the online counselling sessions and reading the bulky digital study material.

4. The learners contact wrong telephone numbers and lodge the complaint that, staff are not picking calls. It is observed that, the following are common reasons of calling the wrong telephone numbers.
5. During the lockdown period, all the educational institutions are working from home and attending the queries by email/ igran portal /mobile phone. Many students were contacted telephone numbers of office and lodged complaint in emails.
6. Submission of wrong contact details at the time of admission/ non-intimation of change of contact details in time to the University: It is regularly observed that, many registered email ids, mobile numbers and addresses of learners are wrong.
7. During the interaction with the learners, it is understood that, most of the rural / backward area students have Language problems in studying the study material and writing the examinations in English medium.
8. Another major drawback of distance learners is poor communication skills. The following are the common mistakes of drafting the emails.
 - a. Mentioning Wrong email subject
 - b. Incomplete email drafting
 - c. Sending the different query for group intimation emails received from Regional Centre.
 - d. Mismatching of Email subject and email draft etc.,
9. Under ODL system, the existing regular college faculty plays the role of Counsellors. Counselling is a group activity, where learner is expected to study the supporting material in advance before participate in a purposeful and meaningful discussion on the subject. In most of the cases, ODL learners are expecting the Counsellors to teach the lessons.

Beyond this, attendance is not mandatory, hence learners ignore the timely study and validity of the Programme. So, the mismatching of counseling skills and learning skills is leading to skill deficiencies. Unless the student is determined to complete the Programme successfully, difficult to cope up due to lack of mentoring.
10. Family problems, health problems, migration to other places due to transfer or marriage etc., personal reasons also affecting the emergence of grievances.
11. Learner cannot resolve the grievances happened due to external reasons and the concerned authorities of University have to take action on these issues. Some of these types of grievances / queries are, Online portal problems, non-receipt of admission confirmation, Delay in receipt of study material, Difficulty in reading the digital study materials, non-reflection of assignment marks in Grade card, Non-receipt of Convocation certificate, after submission of Convocation form, Wrong mentioning of course codes in re-registration form/examination form particularly in modular course system programmes etc.,
12. During COVID 19 lockdown period, most of the learners are relocated during this natural disaster period and unable to access students support services and appear the examinations etc.,

Example 1: It is noticed that, during COVID 19 lockdown period, the attendance of students for online activities is not effective due many reasons mentioned above. Few instances are stated below.

Attendance during Induction Meetings: In case of mandatory events, the attendance is not 100%. Out of 390 students, only 210 students (53%) participated in the online Induction Meeting/ Orientation Program conducted by belong to the study centre located in Bangalore City. Out of 25 students, only 6 students (24 %) attended online Induction Meeting / Orientation Program conducted in outside Bangalore city, the back ward area Kolar.

Example 2: When online event is optional, the attendance is average or below average. Regional Centre conducted Webinar on International Yoga Day for students. Out of 121 invitees, only 23 student (19%) participated.

Feasible Suggestions:

The following are the few suggestions made to handle the queries, complaints, grievances in a effective ways to resolve in time.

1. Introduction of Chatbot: Chat bot is an application of artificial intelligence. ODL universities may use emerging technologies for the welfare of the learners & the University. Using chatbot will reduce manual efforts to the University and reduce the time lag to reply to learners. Chat bot is available 24/7
The chatbot also facilitates the existing learner & prospective learner support. A learner need not wait on hold to talk to the person on the mobile phone (during lockdown period, official telephones are also not available) or waiting for a reply to the email query.
2. Minimization of Time lag between receipt of online application and processing of the same. Most of the queries received during the admission session are related to admission confirmation. Weekly Review Reports may be may be maintained to track the online applications received & processed during the particular week.
3. Minimization of time lag between the date of confirmation of admissions and the receipt of the study materials. Because, academic counselling's sessions will be commenced after completion of admission cycle. The receipt of study material helps the learner to start the studies.
4. A set of guidelines to access University website for various student support services are to be sent to the learner along with confirmation message by email.
5. Most of distance learners are working professionals and scattered in different places, hence interaction through the online meetings is more effective than offline meetings.
6. Effective utilization of Radio & Television for educational purpose to meet the remote learners.
7. Collecting the feedback related to student support services through Google form periodically
8. Effective utilization of communication through Facebook/ Twitter etc., social media
9. Keeping a tracking system to check the enrollment number through the mobile number.
10. Updating the telephone directory of the University in the Website regularly etc.,

Conclusion:

The analysis of queries/ complaints/ grievances helps the University to identify the learner skill deficiencies and to update the system. A satisfied learner is an ambassador of the University and contributes for the enhancement of enrolments and goodwill. At the same time, unsatisfied learner acts as a negative ambassador & ruins the brand image of the University. Hence, need to revamp the present ODL learning methods to meet the learners of both urban and rural areas in this pandemic situation.

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