

Handling Student Grievances in Distance Education: A Challenge or Opportunity?

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Abstract

One of the key issues for quality assurance in student support is timely redressal of student grievances. Accordingly, the University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory organisation of the Government of India, established by an Act of Parliament in 1956 for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examination and research in university education, has formulated and notified on 6 May 2019, a regulation dealing with student grievances in higher education, the University Grants Commission (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019.

The distance education system comprising 15 Open Universities and over 150 dual mode institutions face a number of challenges while addressing the student grievances. While attempting to put forth a holistic profile of the grievance handling mechanism of a leading national open university of the country - Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), it has been found that there are mainly six areas where learners encounter problems. This University has a robust e-grievance handling platform with a well laid out mechanism, thus forming a linkage between the present system vis-à-vis regulatory requirements. Additionally, principal criteria as specified in the regulatory requirements are met, however they can be further embellished upon so as to ensure better support services and enhanced satisfaction level of the learners, depending upon the situation and circumstances arising in the future.

The objectives of the present paper are to discuss the provisions of UGC (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019 with special reference to the Open and Distance Learning system; to enlist the various types of issues faced by the ODL learners; to deliberate upon the institutional mechanism for effectively handling the student grievances; and to highlight the challenges of grievance redressal mechanism in these institutions.

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India has one of the largest networks of higher education setup with 993 Universities, 39931 Colleges and 10725 Stand Alone Institutions contributing towards providing access to higher education to 37.4 million students with 19.2 million male and 18.2 million female students. With this enrolment, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education stands at 26.3 per cent (AISHE 2018-19) and the New Education Policy 2020 of the Government of India has set the target of GER in higher education to 50 per cent by 2035. Out of the total enrolment in higher education, distance education mode contributes to 39.72 lakhs (i.e. around 3.97 million students) which is approximately 10.62 per cent of the total enrolment in higher education (AISHE 2018-19).

With the growing number of the students, the higher education infrastructure of the country is also under tremendous pressure to come to the expectation level of the students. One of the issues that is considered as vital for the quality assurance in student support is addressing the student grievances in an effective and efficient manner. Accordingly, the University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory organisation of the Government of India by an Act of Parliament in 1956, for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examination and research in university education has formulated a regulation dealing with the student grievances in higher education and it is called as the University Grants Commission (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019 which was notified on 6th May 2019 in supersession to the earlier regulation on grievance redressal i.e. University Grants Commission (Grievance Redressal) Regulations, 2012 (UGC, 2019). The objective of the UGC (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019 is, “To provide opportunities for redress of certain grievances of students already enrolled in any institution, as well as those seeking admission to such institutions, and a mechanism thereto.”

In order to strengthen and improve the Distance Education system and provide better educational services to the learners in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, it is essential that the UGC (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019 are implemented and strictly complied by these institutions. Further, as has been experienced by the Student Support Services (SSS) Cell of a Regional

Centre of IGNOU and classified in Table 1 below, it has been seen that the students approach the University due to a number of reasons during the course of their studies, which could include seeking information before or after admission, getting details for inter-region transfers, submission of assignments/examination forms, procedure for getting migration certificates, etc.

Therefore, having a well-developed student service procedure and grievance redressal mechanism in the institution not only strengthens the institutional infrastructure but also helps in building confidence amongst the learners. The following section highlights the importance of having such a mechanism in view of the large student enrolment and the challenges that are faced by the ODL institutions in addressing the learner requirements.

GRIEVANCES OF DISTANCE LEARNERS: AN OVERVIEW

As evident from the enrolment share of the distance education taking the load of 10.62 per cent of the total enrolment in the higher education with the network of 15 Open Universities and over 150 dual mode institutions, the addressing of the student grievances of distance learners is a challenge due to the following reasons:

- (i) Unlike conventional face to face students, the distance learners have limited in-person connectivity with open and distance learning (ODL) institutions and they are also located at far flung remote places;
- (ii) They have flexibility of studying and completing the programs of study in an extended period unlike conventional students;
- (iii) They have to depend on the institution for various dimensions of support services including supply of learning materials, weekend classes, assignments etc.;
- (iv) The distance learners mostly study and complete program at their own pace and convenience as against to the conventional students;
- (v) The nature and type of student grievances of distance learners are different from those of the conventional students; and
- (vi) Distance learners have to rely on mostly different channels of communication other than face to face to address their grievances.

Since the learner profile of distance learners and their student support services environment is different than the conventional students, hence ODL institutions also adopt multimodal strategies to address the student grievances. With the increasing technological interface in the support services provided to the distance learners, the

online interface for addressing the student grievances has provided a viable option for the quick and effective addressal of the student grievances.

Considering the importance of UGC (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019 in managing the student support and their grievances, IGNOU has developed a fairly large hybrid system which ensures timely provision of services to the students. It has SSS Cell to cater to the needs of the learners in face-to-face mode which is adequately supplemented by the online platform i.e. i-GRAM (IGNOU Grievance Redressal Management) Portal. The ensuing section of this paper provides a detailed account of the different kinds of student queries and grievances that the SSS Cell or i-GRAM manage in the University.

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF TYPES OF LEARNER GRIEVANCES

The grievances received by the University can be classified under the broad heads of student support services as:

- (i) Pre-admission:** The queries and grievances under this group include those that the prospective learners would address to concerned Regional Centre or Divisions in the headquarters prior to taking admission at the University. Basically, it entails seeking information on the programs offered, eligibility criteria, fees structure, last date of application, procedure for submitting the online application, list of regional centres and learner support centres activated for the programs, and other pedagogy related matters.
- (ii) Admission:** Once the student is able to successfully submit the admission form, then he/she might again approach the University for seeking information on admission confirmation, identity card, re-registration procedure for subsequent session/semester, re-admission, learner support centre allotment, etc.
- (iii) Learner Support:** This is yet another crucial area in the open university system where the learners might need to contact the University for varied matters related to provision of learner support. This includes information on change of program and course codes, induction schedule, counselling sessions - both theory and practical (online/offline) schedule, change of address/contact number/email id, name correction, change of regional centre /learner support centre, workshop schedule, guidance and submission of project synopsis and final report, admission cancellation and fees refund, issue of bonafide certificate and related queries or grievances.

- (iv) **Self Learning Material (SLM):** Since in the ODL system, the learners receive SLM from the University, therefore issues or queries related to SLM may also arise at the regional centre or concerned LSC where the student is attached. These include either non-receipt or delayed receipt of SLM, receipt of partial set / incorrect set of SLM, and difficulty in accessing the online SLM from the SLM portal, e-Gyankosh.
- (v) **Assessment:** Since the performance assessment of the learner in the University is through formative assessment by way of assignments and summative assessment methods such as by conduct of term end examinations (theory and practical [wherever applicable]) and final project report submission and viva voce, therefore this is yet another area where the students contact the University for their queries or grievances.
- (vi) **Program completion:** Having appeared in the examination and on completion of all the components of the program concerned, the learners might need to contact the University for Convocation related information, issue and verification of provisional certificate and transcripts, credit transfer procedure, **and migration certificate.**

The grievances and queries of the learners are summarised in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Classification of Learner Grievances*

Pre-Admission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on confirmation of admission • Application procedure including mode of payment and related problems • Information on program and its contents • Information on different deadlines • Information on admission eligibility criteria • Information on regional centres/study centres where the program is on offer • Admission procedure and entrance exams if any
Admission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-registration • Online admission • Issue of learner identity card • Re-admission

Learner Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Induction • Academic theory counselling • Practical counselling • Project guidance • Workshop/extended contact program • Field work supervision • Guidance for internship • Change of correspondence address • Change of program • Name correction • Refund of fees/excess fess • Duplicate identity card • Change of regional centre / study centre • Change of course code • Bonafide certificate • Issue of fee receipt • Scholarship/ fee reimbursement
Self Learning Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-receipt • Partial receipt • Receipt of wrong study material • Receipt of damaged study material
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignments • Examination (tee, tep, projects & viva voce) • Declaration of term end examination • Hall ticket • Answer script photocopy • Re-evaluation
Program Completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migration certificate • Credit transfer • Transcript/genuineness/verification • Degree/diploma • Mark sheet & provisional certificate • Degree verification/genuineness • Official transcript • Convocation

*Note: Based on the records of Student Support Service Cell of a Regional Centre of IGNOU

SYSTEM OF GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL

The administrative system of Indira Gandhi National Open University, being an Open and Distance Learning Higher Education Institution is relatively different from the Conventional Educational Institutions which the novice learners find difficult to understand during their initial journey of learning through the ODL system. Lack of familiarisation with the ODL and negligence on the part of learners towards equipping themselves with the information made available to them by the Institution through multiple means, at times lead to queries and grievances. In order to respond to such issues and redress the grievances in an effective and efficient manner, the University has made itself highly accessible and approachable to its learners through offline as well as online modes of communication.

(i) Offline (Face to Face, Telephonic, SMS, Letter/Application)

The offline method of grievance submission and redressal includes a) students' personal visits to the concerned sections and divisions, b) reporting through telephonic communication, and c) letters and applications submitted in person or through postal means to regional centres or learner support centres.

In order to provide seamless access to the learner-specific information and addressing their concerns, there are dedicated sections and help desk counters established in the operational divisions such as Student Registration Division, Student Evaluation Division, Material Production and Distribution Division, etc., Regional Centres and Learner Support Centres spread across the country and abroad. At these counters, trained staff is deployed so as to deal with the students queries and adopt remedial measures for redressal of their grievances in an effective manner. In addition to the above, there is a separate Student Support Centre established at the Headquarters, that functions as a Single Window Support addressing matters related to various support services such as admission, evaluation, study material, etc. Apart from the personal visits, postal communication is one of the common means adopted by learners' to bring forth the issues to the notice of heads of the divisions/field offices that are further transmitted to the officials concerned for attending to their queries.

(ii) Online (E-mail, Social Media, I-Gram, Chatbot)

Keeping in tune with the advancement in Information and Communication Technology, the University provides ICT enabled support to the learners and there is a well-established mechanism of the University that ensures time bound student grievance

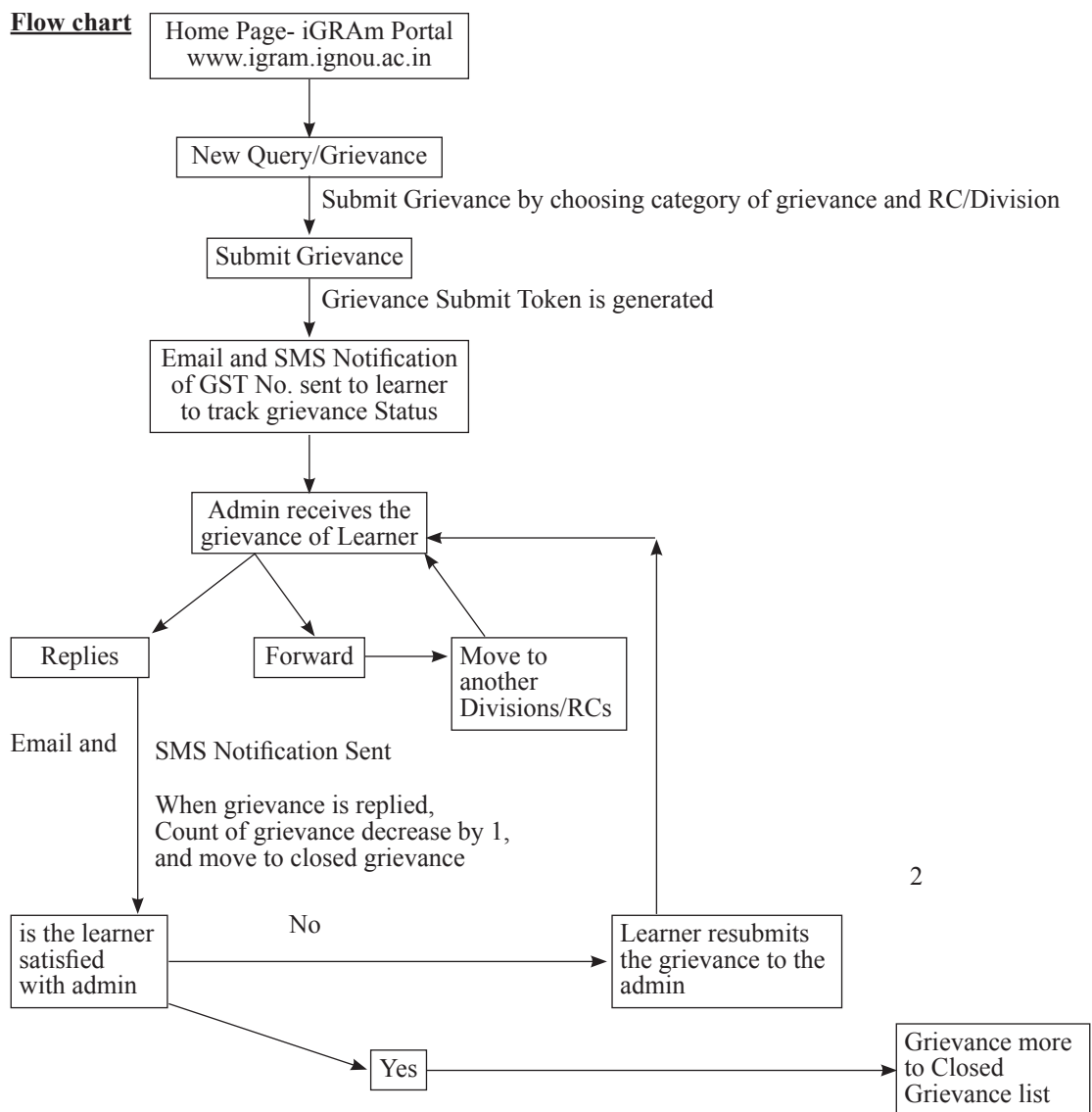
redressal. For bringing forth the queries using ICT, there are yet again numerous means i.e. emails (function-specific emails), specific social media platforms of different units of the University (Facebook pages and Twitter handles) and IGNOU Grievance Redress and Management (i-GRAM). It is an automated IT solution which is an integrated, centralised and web-based system for remedial solutions to the learners' queries and problems. For rendering a focussed and systemic approach to problem-solving, there are identified Nodal persons at each Regional Centre/School/Division/Centre/Unit, responsible for coordinating this crucial activity and ensuring fastidious and time-bound redressal/disposal of grievances. The portal has an in-built provision for forwarding the queries to the sections/divisions/officers concerned, thereby establishing and strengthening linkages in the Grievance Redressal Network of the University and bringing down the turnaround time of the applications received through the i-GRAM. Also, there are other important ICT platforms used by a few Regional Centres for reducing the number of grievances by providing instant response to the frequently asked questions of the learners such as Chatbot. Telegram channel is yet another platform used by various offices for making the learner specific information available to them through updates and notifications.

The i-GRAM

In compliance with the University Grants Commission (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019, relating to the student grievances in higher education, the national open University of India, the Indira Gandhi National Open University has taken a decisive step to address the student grievances through a dedicated online portal, popularly known as IGNOU Grievance Redress and Management (i-GRAM) with the following objectives:

- ◆ Timely redressal of student grievances;
- ◆ Handling of grievance by trained and informed staff;
- ◆ Reliable and accurate information; and
- ◆ An effective feedback mechanism.

The flow chart of the grievance handling by the online portal i-GRAM as given below in Figure 1 depicts the process as it is being handled at the University:



Source: User manual and Operational Documents, IGNOU Grievance Redress and Management (i-GRAM)

Figure 1. Grievance handling by i-GRAM portal

As is evident from the flow-chart here, it is seen that the grievance handling mechanism in this online portal is segmented wherein the whole process commences from the home page of this portal where a learner is required to fill in his/her student credentials, followed by mentioning the problem/query. Notably the student needs to select the respective regional centre to which he/she belongs or the division in the headquarters pertaining to the problem concerned.

On successful completion of the initial form, a unique Grievance Submit Token (GST) number is generated which is communicated to the learner through email and SMS.

This acts as a reference number for the learner to keep track of the grievance submitted by him/her. The i-GRAM official at the concerned regional centre/division receives the grievance which is then either resolved by the relevant section in the regional centre/division and responded to the respective student or alternatively, it is forwarded to a specific regional centre/division for resolution of the grievance. The learner receives an email and SMS when a response is sent to him/her that notifies him/her of the action taken by the office.

Subsequently, if the learner is satisfied with the response and the grievance is resolved then the entry moves to the closed grievance section else the concerned learner has the option of re-submitting the grievance which follows the similar path as is followed at the initial submission of grievance.

Significantly, this online portal has yet another distinct feature through which the University is able to generate different reports which help in keeping a track on the redressal mechanism and acts like a quality control tool for the system. These reports are: Division-wise/RC-wise summary report of Pending Grievances; Division-wise/RC-wise summary report of Closed Grievances-; Division-wise/RC-wise summary report of All received Grievances; and Division-wise/RC-wise summary report of Re-submitted Grievances. These reports together make this system a comprehensive management information system for grievance redressal in the University.

Handling of Grievances by the i-GRAM

The submissions received through the online grievance redressal portal i.e. i-GRAM are not in fact the grievances only but the queries that the learners submit in order to seek information pertaining to various aspects related to their study, which although is otherwise readily available to them through program guide, website, social media platforms, etc. However, easy access and simple process of online application submission perhaps encourage them to seek information through this platform instead of going through the resources and locating the required information themselves. There are 31 minor groups under which the learners have the option to register the grievance, however the same have been classified into seven major categories for the purpose of presenting the data in this research namely pre-admission, admission, learner support, study material, assessment, post program completion and miscellaneous.

The pre-admission queries received through this portal are mainly regarding the entrance test conducted by the University for admission in few professional programs

and that under admission category are related to fresh admission as well re-registration i.e admission in second or third years of programs, wherever applicable. Various queries that arise after confirmation of admission have been clubbed under the learner support head and these include counseling, practicals, synopsis and projects, issues pertaining to identity card, change in correspondence address and program, correction in names and matters regarding refund of fee. Since there are a significant number of queries related to non-receipt of study material, return of the same, incomplete set, etc. this has been kept as a separate category for the purpose of classification in this study. Next group of queries is pertaining to the issues related to assignments, hall ticket, and declaration of term end examination result, re-evaluation, copies of answer scripts and conduct of examination. After the evaluation process, the last set of grievances have been grouped under the title post program completion under which the number of matters regarding Degree/Diploma, credit transfer, migration certificate, transcript/genuineness, official transcript and convocation has been added for presenting the data. The one not falling under any of the aforementioned categories are submitted under miscellaneous or others.

Since its inception in early 2017, the i-GRAM has been popular in addressing the grievances of the students and till August 2020, it had received more than three hundred thousand queries / grievances i.e. at an average of over one hundred thousand grievances per year. The Table below portrays the nature, type and number of grievances handled by the i-GRAM from which it is evident that the maximum number of received queries/ grievances fall under the assessment category (106716) followed by study material (71793), post program completion (58685) and admission (43827) related matters. Accordingly, the percent of grievances received under different categories has been found to be 31.6, 21.26, 17.38, 12.98, 8.99, 7.68 and 0.12 for assessment group, study material, post program completion, admission, learner support, miscellaneous and pre-admission category, respectively (Figure 2). Similar to the total received grievances is the sequence of data in respect of closed grievances which is slightly different for the resubmitted applications as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Grievance and Queries received at the i-GRAM Portal

Query / Grievance Category	Total Number Received	Closed Grievances	Resubmitted Grievances	Pending Grievances
Assessment	106716	104859	158	1699
Study Material	71793	71589	61	143
Post program Completion	58685	57076	161	1447
Admission	43827	41782	127	1917
Learner Support	30350	29481	70	799
Miscellaneous	25948	25338	67	542
Pre admission	396	392	0	4

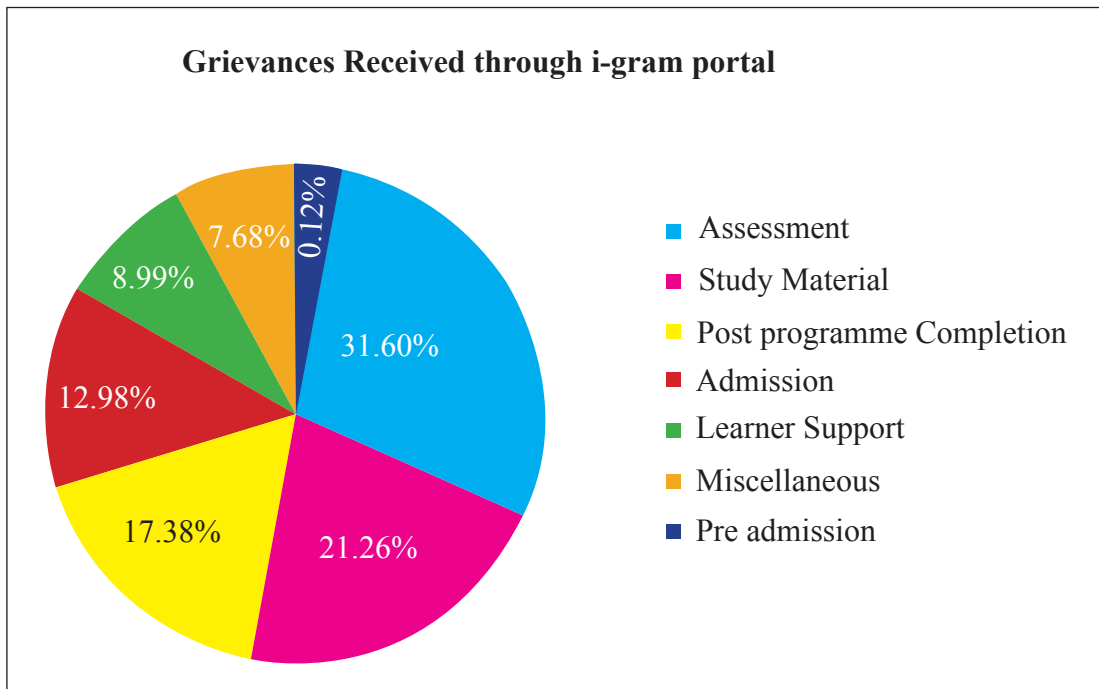


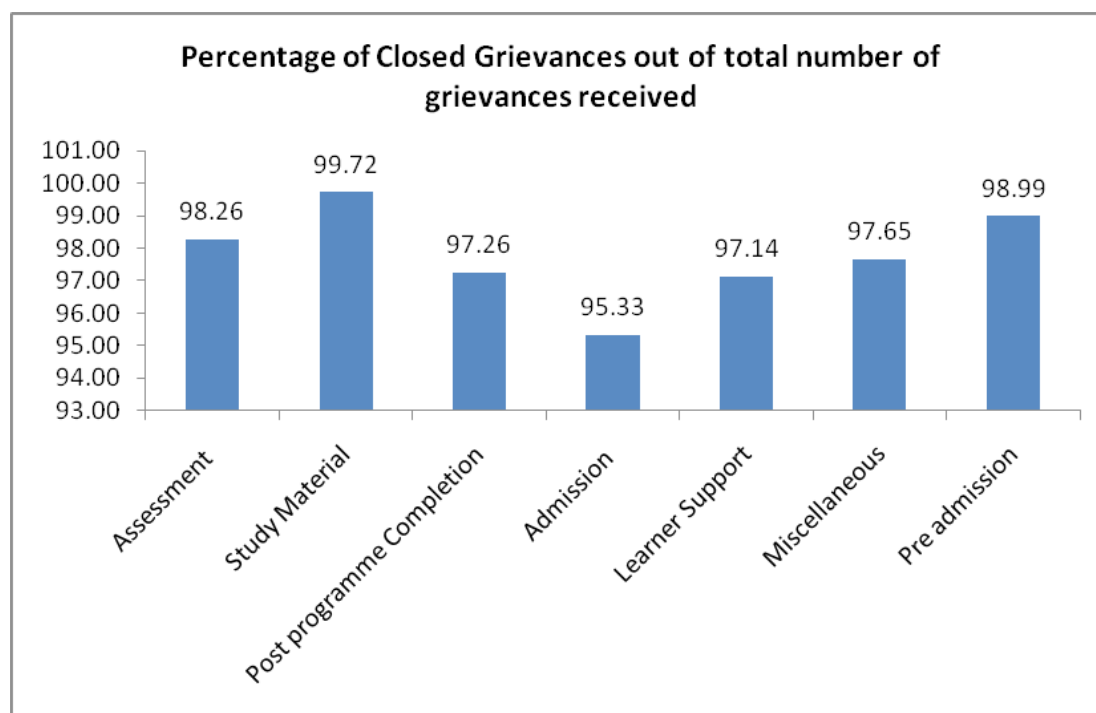
Figure 2. Share of various types of grievances on i-GRAM portal

If we look at the status of grievances and queries resolved through the portal as depicted in Table 3 and Figure 3, it has been found that the highest percentage of closed number of received grievances is that of the study material category (99.72) which is slightly higher than the other groups of grievances. Overall data clearly shows that more than 95 percent of received grievances have been closed through the portal with minor differences in the percentages and the percent of resubmitted grievances is less than one percent for all the categories.

Table 3: Status of Grievances and Queries resolved at the i-GRAM Portal

Query/Grievance Category	Percentage of Closed Grievances to Total no. of Received Grievances	Percentage of Re-submitted Grievances to Total no. of Received Grievances	Percentage of Pending Grievances to Total no. of Received Grievances
Assessment	98.26	0.15	1.59
Study Material	99.72	0.08	0.20
Post program Completion	97.26	0.27	2.47
Admission	95.33	0.29	4.37
Learner Support	97.14	0.23	2.63
Miscellaneous	97.65	0.26	2.09
Pre admission	98.99	0.00	1.01

Figure 3. Closed grievances as a percent of total number of received grievances through i-GRAM portal



LINKAGE BETWEEN PRESENT SYSTEM AND REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

The prevailing system of the University for grievance handling presents ample evidence of the existence of a fairly robust mechanism planned, developed and implemented for query and grievance handling of the learners of this Open University. The present section is a comprehensive deliberation on the regulatory requirements to be followed by every higher education institution in this domain and also a review of the existing University system vis-a-vis these regulatory requirements.

The regulatory requirements as notified in the Gazette of India dated 6th May 2019, the University Grants Commission (Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019, applicable to all the HEIs in the country established under a Central Act or a State Act, and all those HEIs and deemed to be a University shall come under the purview of this Official Gazette. With the objective of providing opportunities to the learners enrolled in any institution and those seeking admission in these HEIs for redressal of grievances through a specified mechanism, the following regulations have been clearly put in place for all the HEIs to strictly comply:

- (i) **Mandatory publication of prospectus, its content and pricing:** As per this requirement, every HEI needs to publish a prospectus minimum of sixty days before the admission commences and provide access to this prospectus through this website. This prospectus needs to give information on the programs on offer for the session, number of seats for the programs wherever applicable, eligibility criteria, selection procedure, fee structure, teaching faculty details, information on academic infrastructure, disciplinary requirements, and any other information desired by the Commission. It is seen that the National University under reference in this paper fully satisfies this requirement and it has a detailed comprehensive prospectus which is published for every session in the academic calendar and it is accessible as a public document from the University website. It provides a detailed account of the programs on offer, structure of each program, eligibility criteria for admission, fee structure, detail of Program Coordinator, learning objectives, list and jurisdiction of Regional Centres, important University notifications/approvals/ recognitions by the regulatory authorities and all other miscellaneous information that could be relevant for the prospective learners. Additionally, for the limited seat programs and/or programs whose admission is through entrance test, a separate prospectus is made available for the learners on the University website.

(ii) **Student Grievance Redressal Committees (SGRC):** According to the UGC regulations, each HEI should establish the following grievance redressal committees namely, Collegiate Student Grievance Redressal Committee (CSGRC), Departmental Student Grievance Redressal Committee (DSGRC), Institutional Student Grievance Redressal Committee (ISGRC) and University Student Grievance Redressal Committee (USGRC). Details of these Committees are given below. Each of these committees, constituted by the Vice Chancellor, are composed of a chairperson, senior faculty members/Dean/Head of the Department and a student representative, generally having a term of two years. It is mandated for these committees to look into the grievances of the students and report its recommendations to the Head of the Institution or the Vice Chancellor as the case may be.

As given above, the UGC Regulations 2019 mandates for appointment of four levels of the committees for handling the student's grievances in the different levels of the institutions under the domain of higher education and these are:


Collegiate Student Grievance Redressal Committee (CSGRC): A complaint from an aggrieved student relating to a college shall be addressed to the Collegiate Student Grievance Redressal Committee (CSGRC).

Departmental Student Grievance Redressal Committee (DSGRC): A complaint by an aggrieved student relating to a Department, or School, or Centre of a University shall be addressed to the departmental Student Grievance Redressal Committee (DSGRC).

Institutional Student Grievance Redressal Committee (ISGRC): Where a complaint does not relate to any academic Department, School or Centre of a University, as the case may be, the matter shall be referred to the Institutional Student Grievance Redressal Committee (ISGRC).

University Student Grievance Redressal Committee (USGRC): To consider grievances unresolved by one or more CSGRC or DSGRC or ISGRC and each USGRC may take up grievances arising from colleges/departments/ Institutions in the respective Universities. (UGC Regulations, 2019).

As specified in the regulations, the National Open University also has a structured institutional framework for redressal of grievances of its learners. The University has constituted a Student Grievance Redressal Committee in the year 2019 which



comprises a Pro-Vice Chancellor as the Chairperson, Head of a School, five Heads of Divisions, two student representatives and the Head of Student Support Centre as its members. At the operational level, the Student Support Centre (SSC) at the headquarters, is the key coordinating body for grievance redressal, there are nodal persons in each of the Divisions/Schools and Regional Centres who are responsible for intra-divisional/intra-School and Regional Centre level grievance redressal management. Therefore, this clearly structured tiered setup effectively fulfils the role and responsibilities for student grievance redressal.

- (iii) Appointment of Ombudsperson:** As per the provisions of this UGC Regulation, an Ombudsperson will be appointed by the State Government or the Central Government as the case may be. This part-time functionary, who is a person of eminence in academics or research, who had been a Vice Chancellor of a University shall be appointed for a tenure of three years or until he/she attains the age of 70 years, whichever is earlier from the date of assuming office. This person is responsible for hearing the appeals of the aggrieved students who have availed of all the other remedial measures as provided in the regulations. The Ombudsperson will be responsible for resolving the grievance within a period of 30 days of receiving the appeal from the student.

The UGC regulation clearly specifies the tenure, removal and conditions of services, and functions of the Ombudsperson besides giving clearcut procedure for grievance redressal by Ombudsperson and SGRC. Further, every HEI needs to prominently display on its website as well as in prospectus the relevant information about the grievance redressal system of the HEI concerned and the Ombudsperson for appeals.

- (iv) Consequences of non-compliance:** This UGC regulation also clearly spells out the procedure to be followed/action to be taken by the UGC against any HEI willfully not following these regulations or failing to comply with the recommendations repeatedly of the Ombudsperson or Grievance Redressal Committees.

From the aforesaid deliberations, it is evident that the present grievance redressal system of the University under study here is adequately synchronised with the regulatory requirements of the UGC. Most of the regulations are implemented as an integral part of the system thereby, facilitating the provision of adequate

support to the enrolled learners. The ensuing section is an effort to highlight the challenges faced by this mammoth system in the process of reaching out to the learners with the objective of giving them the much needed support.


CHALLENGES IN GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL MECHANISM

The size and magnitude of operations of the National Open University under study here is a true example of management of a nationwide system that entails bestowing services to the people spread in the entire length and breadth of the country. In this process, there are achievements as well as certain challenges from time to time that need to be mitigated.

The learners being novice in ODL system are less aware of the procedure and nuances of the distance learning process and as a consequence, face difficulty in understanding their role and responsibilities as an ODL learner in blended teaching and learning environment, giving rise to in fact queries, projected in the form of grievances. They tend to follow the conventional methods which at times are not applicable to this system. Therefore, as the mechanism already exists, it needs to be adequately propagated amongst the learners. What is essential, is basically putting in place rigorous and repeated orientation for the learners so as to familiarise them with the latest developments that are being incorporated in the system for their advantage. In this endeavour, the existing method of reaching out through a multimodal approach including the social media platforms is indeed an effective means.

In the present age of multiple sources of information, the students tend to receive varied kinds of inputs through different channels whose authenticity at times becomes challenging, thus the information getting compromised in this process. Therefore, there is a need for filtering the right kind of information through the right sources so that the students are in possession of the veritable information. Timely reinforcement of pedagogical details needs to be carried out and the system of induction plays an important role in this context. Highlighting the web links and digital sources of information during these induction meets and also later, through online induction videos help the students remain in sync with the teaching learning ecosystem.

The multitier structure of the University necessitates the entire system to remain synchronised and collaborative so that timely services are rendered to the target audience. All the stakeholders and key role players need to remain at par for providing the same and timely information to the learners especially at the level of the learner



support centres which are the face of the University in true sense, being closest to the target audience. Hence, as the information percolates down from one level to the next level, it is essential that all the service providers remain aware of the key ongoing operations. This will ensure timely support services are provided to the concerned. Need of the hour is having an effective management information system in this vast organisational network. Use of digital methods and periodical online reviews of the system involving all the role players is the key to having a well-informed inclusive system.

Since there are a number of online and offline channels existing for the learners and each one of them suited for a particular purpose, the learners often use these platforms interchangeably, thereby resulting in an increase of number of grievances which when analysed reveals that they are basic general queries. The induction meets organised by the University as a part of the inclusive education system have an important role as they serve the purpose of a forum wherein these students are sensitised about the various platforms and their purpose existing in the University. Such congregations of learners serve the objective of reducing the distance between them and the system.

The rapid transformations in ICT make it imperative for the support service personnel to remain abreast with the latest ICT developments pertinent to the education sector. Since the University follows the Hyflex method of teaching and learning, the employees need to be continuously trained and oriented on these developments. Further the Government also encourages the adoption and adaptation of the ICT methods for enhancing digital fluency so as to provide quality and timely services to the target audience, the key being reaching out to diverse populations, ensuring inclusiveness and equity of educational opportunities.

CONCLUSION

All efforts need to be directed towards ensuring a sustainable educational ecosystem that acts as a platform for equal opportunities for the people of this country as well as for those globally dispersed. The Open system needs to be more inclusive and growth oriented so that it remains an institution for human emancipation, growth and development in the years to come. Needless to say, this study presents a multi-focal institutional dimension where it can be seen that this mega-university is indeed an arena for socio-economic upliftment with an inherent system of support services for the students. The institution fulfils the requirements of the University Grants Commission

(Redress of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2019 and makes efforts to improve the educational infrastructure in such a way that the learners have a seamless sail through this path of intellectual awakening and enlightenment. The changing needs of distance learners and dynamism in the ICT environment is indeed a learning opportunity for the University to continue to evolve as per socio-cultural economic global demands.

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What is NIOS

NIOS is an “Open School” that caters to the needs of a heterogeneous group of learners up to pre-degree level. NIOS is the largest “Open School” in the world which caters to the needs of a heterogeneous group of learners.



What does NIOS do?

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) provides opportunities to interested learners by making available the following Courses/Programmes of Study through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode.

- Open Basic Education (OBE) Programme for 14+ years age group, adolescents and adults at A, B and C levels that are equivalent to classes III, V and VIII of the formal school system.
- Secondary Education Course
- Senior Secondary Education Course
- Vocational Education Courses/Programmes

NIOS offers these courses with flexibilities such as ‘Choice of Medium of Instructions’, ‘Choice of Subjects’, ‘Combination of Academic and Vocational Courses’, ‘Pace of Learning’, ‘Continuous Assessment’, ‘Flexible Scheme of Admission and Examination’, ‘Validity of Admission’ and ‘Transfer of Credits’ from other Boards of School Education and State Open Schools to enable learner’s continuation.

How does NIOS Function?

NIOS operates through a network of five Departments, 23 Regional Centres, two Sub Regional Centres, two NIOS Cells, and more than 7400 Study Centres (AIs/AVIs) spread all over the country and abroad. For implementation of OBE programme, the NIOS has partnership with about 853 Agencies providing facilities at their study centres.

NIOS renders quality education through print media such as ‘Self Learning Material’ followed by ‘Personal Contact Programme’ to clear the doubts and concepts. This is further supplemented by various ICT forums like audio and videos on Youtube/Diksha platform and live interactive programmes on PM E-Vidya channels i.e Channel 17 for Secondary, Channel 18 for Senior Secondary, Channel 19 for ISL/IKT/OBE and Channel 20 Vocational courses.