

The Catalytic Role of Digital and Online Learning in the ODL institutions of Assam:

The Case of KKHSOU and GRC, IGNOU

Ritimoni Bordoloi¹ and Prasenjit Das²

Abstract


Over the years, a number of Open & Distance Learning (ODL) institutions have marked their presence in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam. These institutions, despite several glitches, have played an important role by establishing a system of education based on the principles of openness, access and equity. Unlike in conventional universities, learners of the ODL institutions could access the academic and administrative services even during the pandemic-induced lockdown throughout the country. Thus, the basic objective of this paper is to document the benefits of digital learning among the learners of two ODL institutions—Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) and Guwahati Regional Centre (GRC) of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in Assam. Attempt has also been made to examine how the usefulness of general and techno-based teaching-learning could further transform the educational scenario in the state with the help of learners' feedback received through Google analytics on the academic as well as digital services of the two institutions during the pandemic Covid-19 as well as in post-pandemic situations. This paper also addresses the future prospects of delivering sustainable quality learning opportunities to learners in the state through the digital mode so that suitable measures can be adopted by ODL institutions to meet the challenges of learning in emerging times.

KEYWORDS: *Odl, Digital Learning, Online Learning, Covid-19, Sustainable Education*

In the present knowledge economy, the role of higher education in the development of human resources is increasingly becoming a matter of concern. It is because higher education, if imparted with vision, can transform both the individual and society. Besides providing knowledge and wisdom, it can also develop better social skills and leadership qualities among learners, facilitate their intellectual development and

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Education, KKHSOU

²Associate Professor, Department of English, KKHSOU



political awareness, develop greater sense of discipline, create awareness about own well-being as well as that of others, thereby enhancing the standard of living. It also develops important and essential qualities like innovation, productivity, collaboration, teamwork, right decision-making and so on. Moreover, it enhances chances of employability besides producing high quality professionals, researchers, managerial personnel and so on.


However, in spite of all such rosy dreams, the educational requirement of the marginalised and deprived sections of society, such as women, has not been met by the conventional system of education. Due to its rigidities in terms of entry age, accessibility, admission criteria, fixed time schedule, evaluation system, high cost and specifically the number of students vying for limited seats, the conventional system has remained out of reach for a large section of learners even today. As a palpable solution to this problem, the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system emerged and today it has been accepted as a useful and popular mode of higher education across India simply because the system has enabled learners to understand the essence of education—that it is a life-long process and can happen at any time and at any age. As such, ODL has been seen as the best alternative for learners without an access to conventional systems of education or for those who were unable to complete their higher education on time.

In India, as part of the ODL system, along with IGNOU, the state open universities have been playing a prominent role in spreading the benefits of education among the intended learners and empowering their lives in different ways. With the expansion of the ODL system, distance enrolment in India has also been increasing. From only 1,112 enrolments in 1962 at the time of its inception, it has risen to about 40 lakh students. Presently, distance enrolment constitutes 11.1 percent of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 44.5 percent are female learners (AISHE, 2020). This also means that in India, the ODL system has been contributing significantly to improve the Gross Enrolment Ratio in India which aimed to increase the GER in higher education to 30 percent by 2020. However, the New Education Policy 2020 has aimed to increase the same to 50.0 percent by 2035. There has been a steady progress of the ODL system in Assam. In May 1998, Gauhati University (GU) started the Post Graduate Correspondence School (PGCS), which is presently rechristened as the Gauhati University Institute of Open and Distance Learning (GUIDOL). With this initiative, GU emerged as a dual-mode university. Now, Assam has one State Open University, namely KKHSOU in Guwahati, the only state open university among the north-east Indian states, established in 2006.

It has been already stated that the ODL institutions in Assam has been growing over the years. For instance, the Guwahati Regional Centre (GRC) of IGNOU was established in the year of 1996. Even before that, an IGNOU, RC was set up at Shillong, Meghalaya in 1988 covering all the north-eastern states. Previously, the RC at Guwahati also looked after the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. But presently, it has been functioning only in Assam. The RC at Guwahati was established as part of an active initiative to integrate the inaccessible areas of north-east India with the vision to democratise education for grassroot development of India. Understanding that education can be the most effective part of equitable and sustainable development of these states and in order to ensure access and opportunity to the unreached and marginalised, the RC at Guwahati was established to mobilise the ODL mode in the region.

Due to cultural, ethnic and natural diversity of the region and spatial and territorial diversity as a whole, the jurisdiction of RC was limited to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim till December 2000. Presently, the jurisdiction of the GRC is Assam only and all north-eastern states have one RC of IGNOU each. In April 2013, another RC was established in Jorhat in Upper Assam to deal with the increasing student base, vastness of the region and enhance remote connectivity. The objectives of IGNOU RCs are aligned with the overall vision of IGNOU. Currently, the GRC has been offering 78 academic programmes with 24 study centres in 20 districts of Assam with 525 academic counsellors. Presently, it has been offering 25 postgraduate programme, 14 postgraduate and advance diploma and 6 diploma, 5 bachelor degree and 15 certificate programmes. Since its establishment, the GRC has also been offering different degrees and diplomas in Management, Computer Science, Technical and other professional and general programmes. (Source: <http://rcguwahati.ignou.ac.in>)

KKHSOU is the first Open University in the North Eastern Region of India. It has been shouldering greater responsibility of providing higher education opportunities to the people of all the eight states of the region. The university was established by an Act of the Government of Assam in 2005 and started functioning from December 2006 as the 14th Open University in the country. It launched its first academic session in January 2008 with Bachelor's Degree programmes having six schools of studies. Presently, the University offers Ph.D. and MPhil programmes, master's degree programmes, bachelor's degree programmes, postgraduate diploma, diploma and certificate programmes with around 220 study centres across Assam. As per the UGC guidelines, 2019, the Ph.D. programme is conducted at the university headquarters in regular mode.



There has been phenomenal growth in the enrolment of learners in the university from its inception. It has risen from 2,623 in 2008 to more than 30,000 in 2022 with year-wise increase and decrease in enrolment in between the years. The university has been providing opportunities of higher education to people through 300 study centres across the state. The university aims to provide access to higher education to people, to strengthen and diversify the programmes keeping pace with the needs of the times and to use communication technology for distribution of knowledge and to improve the educational scenario of the state. The university has set up the first Community Radio of north-east India in 2010. Known as JnanTaranga, it was later converted to e-radio enabling anyone from anywhere to avail the benefits of the programme through Internet. Within 15 years of its existence, the university has become successful in making in roads to hither to unreached people to provide quality higher education through ODL mode. The growth of the university within a short span of time proved its devotion towards the cause of distance education which is revealed in its objectives. (Source: <http://kkhsou.in>).

It is important to note that open universities like KKHSOU and IGNOU, among other ODL institutions, have played a determining role in Assam even during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic following which the learners of both Universities could access the academic and administrative services without any major strain. However, it is worthwhile to examine to what extent these two universities could provide uninterrupted services to their learners during the lockdown. Therefore, this paper intends to find out the prospects and challenges of providing the benefits of digital learning to the learners of KKHSOU and IGNOU in Assam in general and then to examine how the usefulness of techno-based teaching learning could be further enhanced with the help of learner's feedback received through Google Analytics on the academic services of both universities during the lockdown.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A number of available researches reveal that online and digital education have provided an enriched teaching learning experience in recent times. Most specifically, during the Covid-19 induced lockdown across India, online education played a catalytic role by offering the most resilient means of education during an emergent crisis. However, in a country like India, with specific problems, implementing online and digital learning is not without its inherent problems. For example, acceptance of technology by both

teachers and learners, use of social media for teaching learning purposes, issues of mental health of both learners and their parents. As the points in case, the following studies, among several others, can be referred.

Harjule et al. (2021) conducted a study to provide a broad insight into the awareness, attitudes and perceived mental health of school-going children and their parents towards online learning in India following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The researchers found that as screen time of learners increased manifold during school closure, it caused severe anxiety and mental health issues among the children and their parents across India.

Kamble et al. (2022) in their study stated that the Covid-19 pandemic compelled educational institutions of India to adopt an online teaching-learning (OTL) methodology. But the same was done without adequate discussion on the acceptance of educational technology by teachers. The researchers carried out the study using an online questionnaire among teacher respondents for collecting feedback. The results of the study proposed a valid model to predict technology acceptance among India's teachers.

Rautela et al. (2022), on the other hand, conducted a study on the mediating role of social media in higher education to encourage Interactive Learning. They found that interactions during the online sessions were vital for engaging students during learning. As part of the research, an online questionnaire was used among the learner-respondents belonging to an urban city in western India. The results indicated that learner-learner interactions, as well as the teacher-learner interactions were imperative for better and sustained engagement in online teaching. The study also noted that the use of social media improved learner-learner interaction and students' engagement in the learning process in a technology-mediated learning environment.

As similar studies could be undertaken to understand the technology acceptance by the Indian learners, the present study was undertaken during the peak of the Covid-19-induced lockdown in Assam. Against such existing literature that specifically deal with the experience of online learning on the part of the learners, teachers as well as parents, during the pandemic, the present study was undertaken to understand the role of online learning among the learners of two ODL mode universities i.e. KKHSOU and IGNOU. As very few studies are conducted on digital and online learning in this part of India, the present study holds tremendous significance.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. to find out the prospects and challenges of providing the benefits of digital learning to the learners of KKHSOU and IGNOU in Assam.
2. to examine how the usefulness of techno-based teaching-learning transactions could be further enhanced with the help of learner's feedback on the digital services of the universities during the lockdown and in post-Covid-19 situations.

SAMPLE OF THE STUDY

In Assam, the Regional Centre (RC) of IGNOU, a State level Open University, i.e., KKHSOU and other Distance Education Institutions (DEIs) of dual-mode universities are prominent in delivering education through the ODL mode in the region. However, for this paper, only Guwahati Regional Centre (GRC) of IGNOU and KKHSOU were selected as these institutions have enrolment from all districts of the state.

DATA SOURCES

This paper is based on both primary and secondary data. While preparing this paper, descriptive research methodology has been used.

- (i) Primary Sources:** Learners' feedback during Covid-19 period was collected from April 10th to 17th 2020. Feedback was also collected during the month of September 2021. Random Sampling technique was used for collecting data. Structured Questionnaires for both cases were designed in Google Forms covering the learners' perspective and feedback on the online and digital services of KKHSOU and IGNOU. The questionnaire was sent to a total of 300 learners but only 178 responses were received. This broke down to 100 learners from KKHSOU and 87 from IGNOU. Most of the respondents were perusing their Master's Degree Programmes from these institutions. Analysis of the data received was carried out using simple statistical tools like percentage.
- (ii) Secondary data:** Data of various online activities of KKHSOU and the GRC, IGNOU as well as other official records have been used to carry out the present study.

DATA COLLECTING TOOLS

A questionnaire was developed in Google Forms to collect feedback from learners. The

components of the questionnaire included background of learners; educational benefits, social and technological knowledge received by them; challenges and prospects of online or digital support services of both the universities and so on. Here, the authors acknowledge Dr. Nirupoma Barik for helping in designing the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Although the main focus of the paper is to explore how learners can benefit from digital services provided by both universities, the questionnaire was designed in such a way that a comprehensive understanding of the educational delivery and learner's expectation from the ODL systems could also be assessed in order to derive a more learner-friendly learning environment in the coming days, particularly in post-pandemic conditions.

Feedback was received based on some important components related to learner support services and other academic benefits during and after the pandemic. This includes educational benefits, technological benefits, availability and usability of technological tools and support, social benefits, psychological fulfilment from the courses, challenges and prospects of online learning.

Objectives 1 - to find out the prospects and challenges of providing the benefits of digital learning to the learners of KKHSOU and IGNOU in Assam.

The tabulated results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Educational Benefits

Benefit	SA	AG	NC	DA	TDA
Helped to enrich knowledge on the subject matter	72 (40.44 %)	100 (56.17 %)	6 (3.37 %)	0	0
Capable of disseminating- knowledge gained from the course	50 (28.0 %)	92 (51.6 %)	35 (19.66 %)	1 (0.56 %)	0
Got a second chance of learning and fulfilled dreams of higher education	56 (31.46 %)	100 (56.17 %)	22 (12.35 %)	0	0
Increased thirst for knowledge and motivated for life-long education	80 (44.94 %)	90 (50.56 %)	8 (4.49 %)	0	0
Encouragement to others for higher education	100 (56.17 %)	78 (43.82 %)	0	0	0

(SA=Strongly Agree, AG=Agree, NC=No Comment, DA=Disagree, TDA=Totally Disagree, NR= No Response)

From Table 1, it can be observed that amongst the respondents, 40.44 percent strongly agreed and 56.17 percent agreed that the courses helped them to enrich their knowledge on the subject matter to a great extent. Likewise, 28 percent respondents strongly agreed and 51.6 percent they are now capable to disseminate the knowledge gained from the courses. However, about 20 percent respondents did not provide any comment. Interestingly, one learner disagreed about the knowledge gained from the courses. Moreover, amongst the respondents, 31.4 percent and 56.17 percent strongly agreed and agreed that they got a second chance to fulfil their dreams of higher education. Again, a majority of the respondents were of the opinion that their thirst for knowledge had increased and they are now motivated for life-long education; and 44.49 percent and 50.56 percent respondents strongly agreed and agreed to this. Only 5.0 percent disagreed that they are motivated for life-long education. Regarding the question about encouragement to others for higher education, from the total respondents 56.17 percent and 43.82 percent strongly agreed and agreed that they encouraged others to pursue higher education from these ODL institutions.

Secondly, Table 2 shows the expectations of learners from the programmes.

Table 2: Expectation of the Learners

Learning Expectations	SA	AG	NC	DA	TDA
Inculcation of proper attitude and values for better life	20.0 %	71.3 %	8.0 %	0.7 %	0
Earning opportunities from the course	11.0 %	59.7 %	22.0 %	7.0 %	0.3 %
To relate subject matter with real-life situations	16.3 %	52.3 %	25.0 %	6.3 %	0
Development of social skills and creative thinking of the learner	21.3 %	58.0 %	17.0 %	3.7 %	0
Development of skills of using computer/Internet and other technology tools	10.0 %	30.7 %	30.7 %	27.0 %	1.7 %

(SA=Strongly Agree, AG=Agree, NC=No Comment, DA=Disagree, TDA=Totally Disagree, NR= No Response)


Amongst the respondents, 20 percent strongly agreed and 71.3 percent agreed that the focus of the courses they studied was on inculcation of proper attitudes and values for better life; only 0.7 percent in total disagreed to it and total 8.0 percent did not comment on this. Again, regarding the earning opportunities from the courses, it was found that 11.0 percent respondents strongly agreed and 59.7 percent agreed, while 22.0 percent

respondents in total did not comment on it, 7 percent disagreed that courses could not help them to get an earning opportunity. In a question like how the subject matter, they had studied, was related to real-life situations, 16.3 percent respondents strongly agreed and 52.3 percent agreed positively as the courses helped them immensely in their personal and social life. Again, it was also observed that 21.3 percent strongly agreed and 58 percent agreed that the courses helped them in the development of social skills and creative thinking skills. Regarding the development of skills of using computer/ Internet and other technology tools, 10 percent respondents strongly agreed and 30.7 percent agreed, while 30.7 percent did not give any comment on the question. However, a major percentage i.e., 27 percent respondents totally disagreed that the courses helped them to develop their skills of using computer, internet and other technological tools. Thirdly, the questionnaire also included a few questions regarding the technological benefits the learners of both the universities might have availed during the Covid-19 pandemic and in post-pandemic conditions as can be seen through the data available in Table 3.

Table 3: Technological Benefits of the learners during Covid-19 and Post pandemic:

Technological Benefits during Covid-19 and post- pandemic	SA	AG	NC	DA	TDA
Increased capabilities to handle a computer/ electronic gadget more confidently	100 (56.18 %)	68 (38.20 %)	0	10 (5.61 %)	0
Became capable to use Internet realising its importance in present day context	90 (50.56 %)	52 (29.21 %)	32 (17.98 %)	4 (2.24 %)	0
Became capable to perform tasks needed to do digitally in day-to-day life	80 (44.94 %)	90 (50.56 %)	6 (3.37 %)	2 (1.12 %)	0
Capable to use social media to get connected with people	102 (57.30 %)	70 (39.32 %)	6 (3.37 %)	0	0
Realised the need for judicious and ethical use of technology	20 (11.23 %)	28 (15.73 %)	100 (56.17 %)	22 (12.36 %)	8 (4.49 %)

(SA=Strongly Agree, AG=Agree, NC=No Comment, DA=Disagree, TDA=Totally Disagree, NR= No Response)



Although the Covid-19 pandemic made the teaching learning environment more techno-friendly, suddenly all those involved in the entire process were compelled to use technology without much prior knowledge on how to use technology with proper pedagogy. Teachers and learners alike started using some social media platforms, mobile-based learning, Google classroom, various online platforms like ZOOM, Google Meet, Cisco Webex etc. for transmitting and pursuing the course contents. However, there are certain challenges of providing digital and online education in state like Assam that cannot be overlooked. For example, the digital division in terms of accessibility, affordability, electricity connections etc. in the context of Assam looms large when one considers the idea of providing online education in any form. From the Table 3 it has been seen that during the pandemic and particularly in post-pandemic conditions, the learners emerged as more techno-user friendly. They developed the capacity to use online and social media platforms as about 50 percent to 57 percent strongly agreed to all the dimensions of the technological benefits such as increased capabilities to handle computer and electronic gadget more confidently, to use internet for academic, to use social media for social connections etc. But interestingly, they did not comment on the need of ethical use of technology as the majority of the respondents (56.17 percent) were unable to provide any comment on the pedagogical and ethical issues of technology for learning purposes.


Objectives 2 - to examine how the usefulness of techno-based teaching-learning transactions could be further enhanced with the help of learner's feedback on the digital services of the universities during the lockdown and in post-Covid-19 situations.

If we look at the digital services of both KKHSOU and GRC, IGNOU it can be observed that IGNOU has a well-designed and highly enriched e-resource repository called e-GyanKosh which is in fact a National Digital Repository to store, index, preserve, distribute and share digital learning resources developed by the ODL Institutions of India. While KKHSOU, as a state open university, has only been trying to provide various digital services to the learners since its inception. Besides having a learner friendly website, IGNOU has the credit of introducing Gyan Vani, an FM radio, with the aim to enhance and supplement the teaching-learning process, to address local educational, developmental and socio-cultural requirements of the people. Similarly, the University has introduced Gyan Darshan (GD), the educational television of the University. As a joint venture of the MHRD, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting,

Prasar Bharati and IGNOU, the channel offers educational programmes covering a wide range of subjects and catering to a diverse group of learners. Besides, services like IGNOU Online caters to the learning needs of the learners from diverse backgrounds and locations. As reported by the respondents, besides availing the resources provided by the University, the learners enrolling in the GRC, could interact with the teachers as well as the RC functionaries for any academic and administrative matters during the lockdown and post-pandemic conditions.

KKHSOU was established with the motto of providing access, equity and quality in education to a vast majority of people. Apart from providing the printed materials and counselling sessions conducted in the study centres; the university has also been producing important OERs in local languages to meet local requirements. A number of educational audio-visual programmes are regularly uploaded in the university's YouTube channel. The learners of the University can access their specific e-SLMs, Assignments, library facilities, question banks and other relevant information from the university website which is updated regularly for keeping the stakeholders up-to-date regarding the various activities and resources of the university. Besides, the university has been trying to give some live audio-visual classes on various academic contents through its official YouTube and Facebook pages for the learners which turned out to be most beneficial during the lockdown triggered by Covid-19 pandemic. KKHSOU also started e-mentoring services during the lockdown for reaching the learners in order to provide the human care in terms of academic and psychological support during the pandemic.

According to the learner respondents of both Universities, the Learners Portal was the most effective Learner Support Service (LSS) before the lockdown, but during the lockdown and post-pandemic situations, it was found that the Mobile app became the most effective LSS. When asked about online admission done in the Pre-lockdown period, the learners reported that they had faced many problems. 36.3 percent learners faced problems of internet connection followed by 25.5 percent facing problems in payment, 19.6 percent facing problems related to understanding the instructions and 18.6 percent could not fill up the form without the assistance from others. This proves that apart from the internet connection, the lack of training on the use of technical devices is one of the biggest challenges. Although the majority of the learners (more than 70 percent) knew about the provisions of E-SLMs, it was found that before the lockdown, the learners preferred printed SLMs, but during the lockdown, they



preferred E-SLMs. (As 61.6 percent preferred printed SLMs and 38.4 percent preferred e SLMs before lockdown. During the lockdown, 87.5 percent preferred E-SLMs and 12.5 preferred printed SLMs). Regarding YouTube of KKHSOU, 46.7 percent learners accessed KKHSOU YouTube videos before the lockdown, but during the lockdown and post-pandemic situations, the percentage was 57.5 percent. Even during the lockdown, majority of the learners believed that YouTube is the most beneficial social media compared to Facebook, WhatsApp and Email services. Besides during the lockdown, 80 percent learners agreed that E-SLMs and live classes helped them to develop their ICT based practices and skills.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the above analysis, it was observed that digital and online learning resources can be tuned towards a more effective learning goal. By considering the flexibility and mobility of technological insertions in the teaching-learning environment, one could perhaps reframe and redesign LSS made available by universities like IGNOU and KKHSOU, with the 21st century learning requirements. However, the different changes that had taken place in the field of higher education following the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic, have larger implications for teaching, learning and research in the field of higher education. The pandemic also helped in understanding the fact that the move toward online teaching-learning on the part of both the teachers and learners would minimise many of the former gaps in education further implying an imminent convergence of both modes of education in the days to come. However, for long-term sustenance and survival of digital and online learning, a systemic rethinking of the service quality and delivery of the Indian ODL institutions should be a priority among the stakeholders of the field.

Though up to date with the changing needs of the learners of the current era, both KKHSOU and IGNOU should critically view the idea of ‘useful’ knowledge to be imparted to the learners in the context of post-pandemic higher education. Here, there is much scope to understand the utility of digital and online learning as the contemporary and future effective practice for teaching-learning in the entire country. This study is expected to help in reviewing the actions and policies implemented by both universities. However, based on the feedback received from the learners, meaningful utilisation of digital and online learning would further expedite the much-needed transformation in higher education, and for that, proper institutionalisation of certain best practices

taken during the pandemic would be required. One example will suffice to end the discussion. For example, asynchronous teaching-learning, such as MOOCs and pre-recorded teaching materials by teachers, have the potential to create more convenience for the learners during any crisis. Thus, the road ahead, following the NEP 2020, is replete with newer opportunities and more learner-friendly educational experiences. Hence, it's time to grab those opportunities.

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AWARDS AND RECOGNITION



The proactive and continuous efforts of NIOS in the domain of Indian Sign Language have also been recognised at national and international forum. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) has been awarded prestigious UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize

2021 for its programme on 'Enabling education of persons with disabilities (PWDs) through technology enabled inclusive learning material, with specific focus on Indian Sign Language (ISL) based content'.

