

Personal Contact Programmes in Open Schooling: A Survey Study of NIOS

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ABSTRACT

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) works with the vision of “Education for All – Reaching the Unreached through Sustainable, Inclusive and Quality Open Schooling.” As the world’s largest open schooling system, NIOS provides learning opportunities to diverse groups of learners. One important academic support activity under NIOS is the Personal Contact Programme (PCP), which offers face-to-face interaction among learners, tutors, and peers. PCPs help reduce the sense of isolation often experienced in distance learning and support learners in understanding their courses better.

The present study applied a survey methodology to collect data from 1,230 learners and 320 stakeholders viz. NIOS Regional Directors of Regional Centers, Study Center Coordinators, School Principals, State Open School Representatives, and Tutors/Teachers conducting NIOS PCPs. Key objectives include assessing learners' opinions on PCPs, identifying motivations for participation, and exploring preferences for activities and ICT integration. The findings revealed a positive perception of PCPs among learners, with a majority expressing satisfaction and recognising the value of these programs in addressing academic challenges. However, the study also highlighted areas for improvement, such as enhancing communication strategies, improving access to study materials, and optimising the delivery of PCPs. The findings of this study have significant implications for the design and implementation of future PCPs and other academic support initiatives in open schooling systems worldwide.

Keywords: *Personal Contact Programs (PCPs), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Open Schooling, Information and Communication Technology (ICT).*

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INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), established in 1989 by the then Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, is the world's largest open schooling system. The institute is guided by the vision of "Education for All – Reaching the Unreached through Sustainable, Inclusive and Quality Open Schooling". NIOS provides flexible learning opportunities at the Open Basic Education, Secondary and Senior Secondary levels, and vocational education. Many of the learners are school dropouts, working adolescents, children with special needs, and those residing in remote areas. While the open and distance learning (ODL) model offers flexibility, it also exposes learners to risks of academic isolation, low motivation, and high attrition if robust support systems are not in place (Simpson, 2013; Tait, 2014).

Learner support in ODL has long been recognised as a critical success factor (Tait & Mills, 1999; Thorpe, 2002). Among various support strategies, face-to-face interaction continues to be highly valued, particularly in contexts where digital infrastructure remains uneven and learners often lack strong self-regulation skills (Bernard et al., 2004; Mishra, 2017). In NIOS, the Personal Contact Programme (PCP) serves as the primary face-to-face academic support mechanism. Conducted at accredited study centres, PCPs in NIOS are mandated for a maximum of 30 hours per subject per academic year, mostly held on weekends or holidays. For subjects with practical components (e.g., Science, Home Science, Painting, Data Entry Operations), additional practical-oriented PCP sessions are conducted, making the total contact hours up to 45 hours per subject in such cases. These sessions are intended to clarify conceptual doubts, demonstrate practical work, and foster peer interaction. Early evaluative studies on NIOS highlighted the significance of face-to-face interaction as a key component of learner support. Sujatha (2002) reported that learners consistently rated personal contact sessions as the most useful component of the support system. A decade later, Sharma (2011) found PCP reinforces the role of structured face-to-face tutoring in improving academic outcomes. Similar evidence from other open schooling systems in the Global South, including African contexts, highlights that regular face-to-face sessions significantly reduce dropout rates and enhance learner confidence (Glennie & Mays, 2013).

Despite these affirmative findings, several gaps remain. Most existing studies on NIOS are either older, region-specific, or based on small samples (Sujatha, 2002; Sharma, 2011). Stakeholder perspectives beyond learners, such as those of regional directors, study centre coordinators, and tutors who are directly involved in the implementation of PCPs, have not been examined yet. Moreover, with increased digital penetration and the widespread adoption of blended approaches after the COVID-19 pandemic (Mishra, Sahoo, & Pandey, 2021), learners' preferences for technology-integrated or hybrid PCPs are not adequately documented. Recent studies of Indian ODL also point to persistent challenges in rural access and the need for more responsive support designs (Kumar & Sharma, 2020; Mishra, 2017).

Addressing these gaps, the present survey study investigates (i) learners' perceptions of the usefulness of PCPs, (ii) motivational factors and barriers impacting participation in PCPs, (iii) preferences for pedagogical activities and the integration of ICT within PCPs, and (iv) multi-stakeholder recommendations for strengthening the design and delivery of PCPs in NIOS.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a survey research design. The target population comprised all learners currently enrolled in the Secondary and Senior Secondary courses of the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). In addition, a wide range of stakeholders directly involved in the planning, administration, or delivery of Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) was included, namely: NIOS Regional Directors, Coordinators of Accredited Institutions (AIs – Accredited Institutions, AVIs – Accredited Vocational Institutions, and SAIEDs – Special Accredited Institutions for Education of the Disadvantaged), school principals, representatives of State Open Schools, *Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan*, *Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti*, and tutors conducting PCP sessions.

For sampling learner respondents, simple random sampling was used. Google Forms containing the questionnaire tool were disseminated through SMS to registered mobile numbers, ensuring every enrolled learner had an equal probability of selection. For stakeholders, purposive sampling was applied to deliberately include individuals possessing specialised knowledge and direct experience in the organisation and conduct of PCPs. This resulted in the inclusion of administrators from all 23 NIOS Regional Centres, coordinators from all NIOS study centres including AIs, AVIs, and SAIEDs, along with representatives from institutions and practising PCP tutors.

Two parallel structured questionnaires, one for learners and the other for stakeholders, were developed by the researcher. Content validity was established through review by subject-matter experts. A total of 1,550 complete and usable responses were obtained, comprising 1,230 learners and 320 stakeholders involved in the management and delivery of PCPs.

Data analysis combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. Closed-ended responses were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, including frequency counts and percentages, following systematic tabulation. Responses to open-ended items were analysed using thematic analysis: data were repeatedly read, initial codes generated, recurrent patterns identified, and salient themes extracted and interpreted to yield deeper insights into participants' experiences and recommendations.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The present study was undertaken to examine the participation patterns, perceptions, motivational factors, barriers faced and preferences of NIOS learners and stakeholders with

respect to PCPs of NIOS. Data were gathered through an online survey from 1,230 learners and 320 stakeholders and subsequently analysed. The findings, interpreted in relation to the objectives, are presented below:

Learners' Perceptions of Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) conducted in NIOS

Participation Rates in PCPs

A key focus of the study was the extent of NIOS learner engagement with Personal Contact Programmes. As shown in Table 1, more than half of the learner respondents (54.2%) reported having attended PCP sessions at their designated study centres, whereas a significant proportion (45.8%) stated that they had not participated. These results indicate that, although PCPs are organised for the benefit of all enrolled learners and successfully reach over half of the target population, a considerable number of learners continues to remain disengaged from this face-to-face academic support initiative. This pattern of moderate participation aligns with prior empirical evidence from NIOS contexts, where structured remedial sessions like PCPs have been shown to enhance learner motivation and academic performance, yet barriers such as scheduling conflicts and geographical access often limit full engagement (Sharma, 2011).

Table 1: Learners' Responses on Participation in PCPs

Learners attended Personal Contact Programs (PCPs)	No. of Learners	% of Learners
Yes	667	54.22%
No	563	45.80%
Total	1230	100%

Barriers to Participation: Structural and Personal Constraints

The researcher further investigated the reasons for learners' non-participation to PCPs. Figure 1 highlights the primary factors contributing to non-attendance among the 45.80% of learners (as indicated in Table 1) who did not engage in PCPs. The most commonly reported reason was the non-conduct of PCPs at learners' respective study centres (43.9%). This finding raises significant concerns regarding inadequate communication between study centres and learners, given that PCPs constitute an important element of the NIOS academic framework. Study centres are responsible for organising and conducting PCPs, including preparing and sharing timetables with learners based on their needs and availability. Therefore, NIOS should ensure to communicate in advance regarding the PCP schedules to enrolled learners.

About one-fourth (25.4%) of learners identified geographic distance from the study centre as a major barrier. This finding suggests the need for enhanced infrastructure and institutional support in such areas to improve accessibility. Personal circumstances were also cited by a notable proportion (23.6%) as a significant deterrent to participation. In the ODL context, learners are expected to demonstrate self-motivation to overcome such challenges. However, institutions should implement targeted initiatives to foster motivation and encourage attendance at PCPs. It is recommended that PCPs be designed to be more personalised and interactive to increase learner engagement and attendance.

Other reported barriers included the unavailability of subject tutors (5.2%) and difficulties in comprehending the content (2.0%), both of which highlight systemic shortcomings in programme delivery. These results suggest that lack of resources represent a potential barrier in ODL systems, necessitating timely identification and resolution.

Overall, the reasons for non-attendance in PCPs appear to arise from lack of awareness and communication, logistical difficulties, personal constraints, and inadequate resources or quality of PCP delivery. The findings highlight a likely gap in disseminating information about the availability and scheduling of PCPs, which adversely impacts overall participation rates.

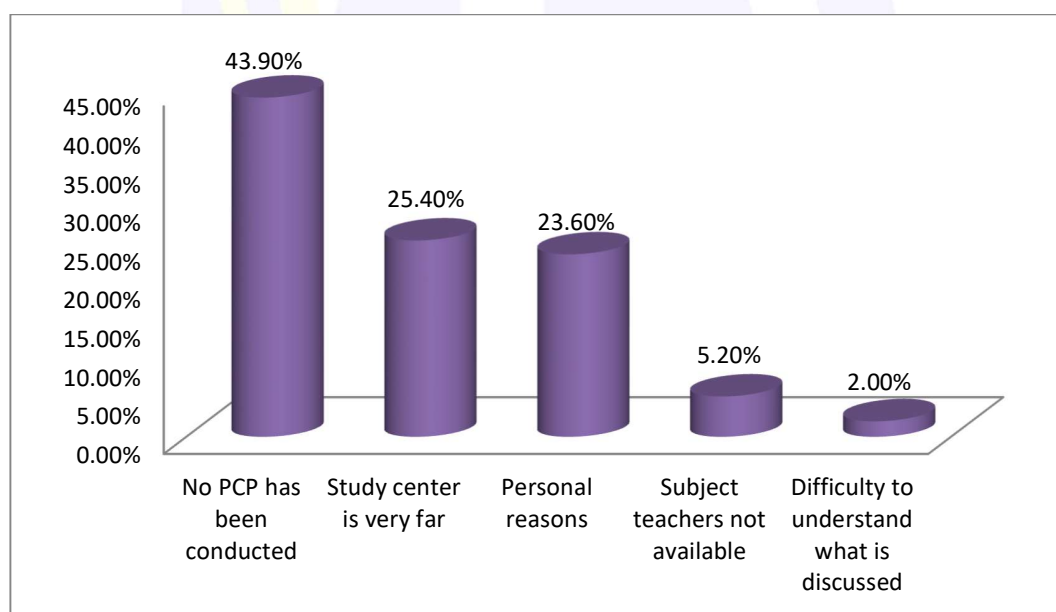


Figure 1: Reasons for Not Attending PCPs by NIOS Learners

Learners' Satisfaction with Attended PCPs

Among the learners who attended PCPs (comprising 667 participants, or 54.22% of the total sample, as shown in Table 1), the majority reported high levels of satisfaction, as illustrated in Figure 2. Approximately 89.7% of these learners indicated that the sessions were beneficial and

expressed overall satisfaction with their experience. The high satisfaction rate aligns with findings that PCPs serve as an effective tool for learner support and overall development in open schooling (Sharma, 2012). This shows the potential effectiveness and relevance of PCPs in meeting learners' academic needs when they are appropriately accessed and implemented.

In contrast, only 10.3% of attendees reported dissatisfaction. Possible reasons for this dissatisfaction could relate to aspects such as content delivery, pedagogical approaches, or session management, highlighting the importance of qualitative enhancements in instructional practices to further improve learner experiences.

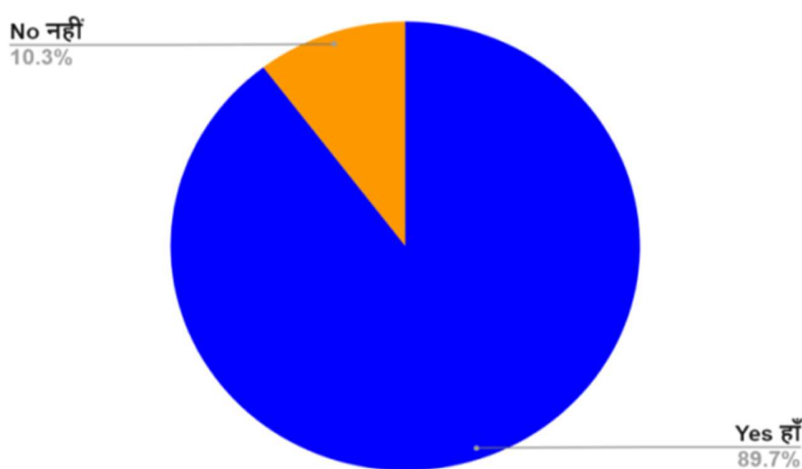


Figure 2: Learners' Satisfaction with PCPs

Motivating factors for Attending PCPs

The learners who attended Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) were further asked about their reasons for participation. The findings are presented in Figure 3. Academic motivations emerged as the primary drivers of attendance. The most frequently cited reason was preparation for examinations, reported by about two-third (66.5%) of respondents. This was closely followed by the need to address study-related difficulties (55.4%) and to clarify doubts concerning Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) with 52% respondents. TMAs form an integral part of the NIOS assessment system. While passing TMAs is not mandatory for certification, the marks obtained in TMAs contribute 20% weightage to the theory component of each subject, with the remaining 80% derived from the public examination. These TMA marks are added to the public examination scores, thereby influencing the learner's overall percentage.

These predominant motivating factors illustrate the distinctive role of PCPs in supporting self-directed study and enhancing performance in assessments within the ODL framework. Additionally, 40.7% of learners attended PCPs to interact with peers which are a form of social connection otherwise limited in ODL environments. On the other hand, 39.9% participated to

share their learning experiences. Such responses highlight the social and collaborative value of PCPs, indicating their capacity to cultivate a more interactive and community-oriented distance learning experience.

These findings presented the benefits of PCPs such as doubt clarification, exam preparation support, motivation enhancement, peer interaction, and overall learner engagement in overcoming the isolation inherent in self-study modes.

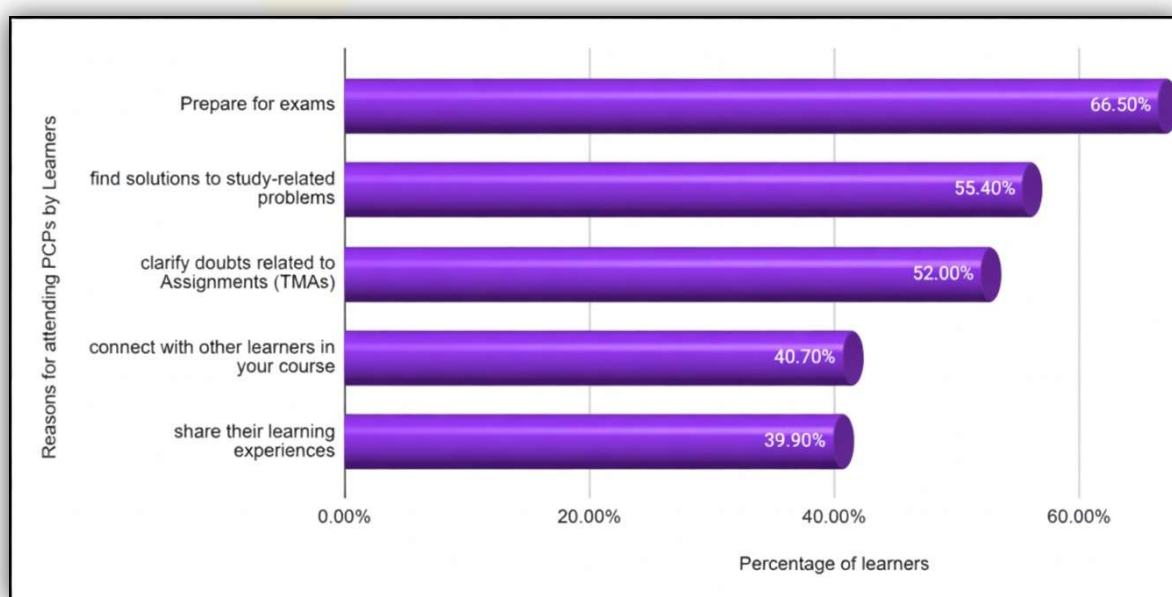


Figure 3: Reasons for Attending PCPs by Learners

Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Utility of PCPs

Stakeholders, including NIOS Regional Directors of Regional Centres, Study Centre Coordinators, School Principals, State Open School Representatives, and Tutors/Teachers responsible for conducting PCPs, largely supported the learners' positive views on PCPs. Their responses regarding the benefits of PCPs for learners are presented in Figure 4.

A substantial majority of stakeholders (78.2%) confirmed the utility of PCPs in addressing and resolving academic difficulties. In addition, a considerable proportion viewed these sessions as effective for examination preparation (64.3%) and for providing clarifications related to assignments (63.6%). Stakeholders also acknowledged the value of PCPs in promoting peer interaction and the sharing of experiences. It reinforces their contribution in enhancing the learner experience beyond purely academic instruction.

The alignment between learners' and stakeholders' perspectives demonstrates a common recognition of the academic and interpersonal advantages offered by PCPs within the ODL framework.

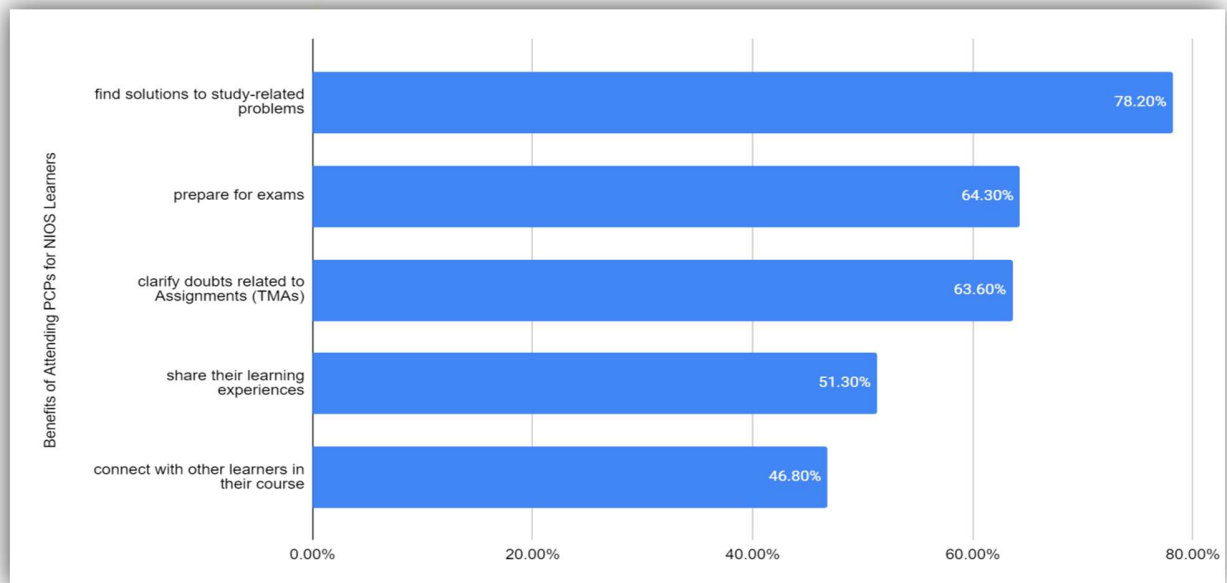


Figure 4: Benefits of Attending PCPs for NIOS Learners as Responded by Stakeholders

Pedagogical Preferences and ICT Integration

When asked about the preferred pedagogical design of Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs), learners expressed a strong preference for practical and interactive teaching methodologies, as shown in Figure 5. Practical sessions conducted in laboratory settings ranked highest (48.4%), closely followed by multimedia-based activities, such as video demonstrations (47.1%). Group-based assignments, which promote collaborative learning opportunities, were also highly valued (46.4%). These preferences indicate the learner inclination toward experiential, hands-on, and cooperative pedagogical approaches over traditional lecture-based methods.

This inclination was further evidenced by a notable preference for real-time interactions with subject matter experts through video conferencing (37.9%), highlighting the appeal of technology-enabled engagement that allows direct access to expertise even in distance learning contexts.

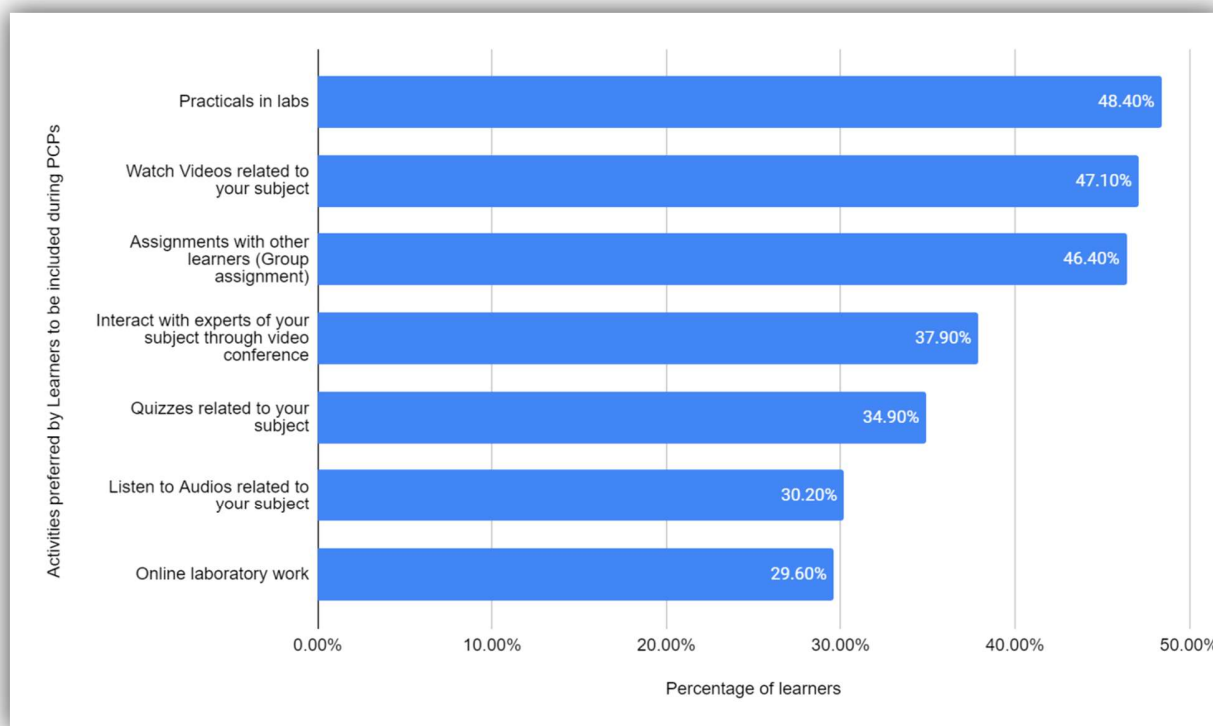


Figure 5: Activities Preferred by Learners to be included during PCPs

These learner preferences are consistent with the documented features and objectives of PCPs in the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) framework, which emphasise hands-on practical sessions (especially for practical subjects), direct tutor-learner and peer interactions, doubt clarification through interactive methods, and the integration of multimedia resources to support experiential and collaborative learning. PCPs are being used as platform for personalised guidance, peer collaboration, practical work, and motivational support, aligning with the desire for interactive and technology-enhanced elements to overcome isolation in self-study.

The integration of technology (Figure 6) was further confirmed by the high rates of smartphone ownership (96%) and internet access (84%) among learners, showing strong potential for ICT-enabled interventions in academic support. The most accessible ICT devices at learners' homes included television (64.71%), followed by laptop/desktop/tablet (54.22%), and radio (29.02%). When queried about preferred devices for attending live PCP sessions (Figure 7), majority of learners preferred smartphones (86.8%), with laptops, television, desktops, and radio serving as secondary options. This level of digital readiness presents a strategic opportunity for NIOS and other ODL institutions to enhance online delivery of PCPs through mobile platforms and synchronous virtual activities.

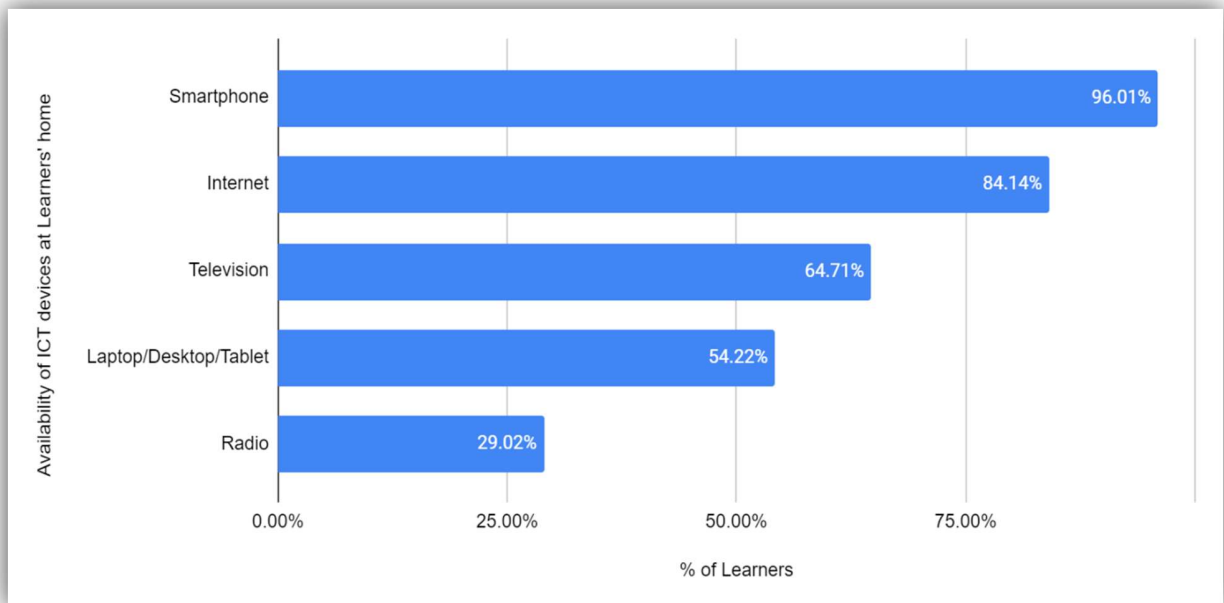


Figure 6: Availability of ICT Devices at Learners' Home

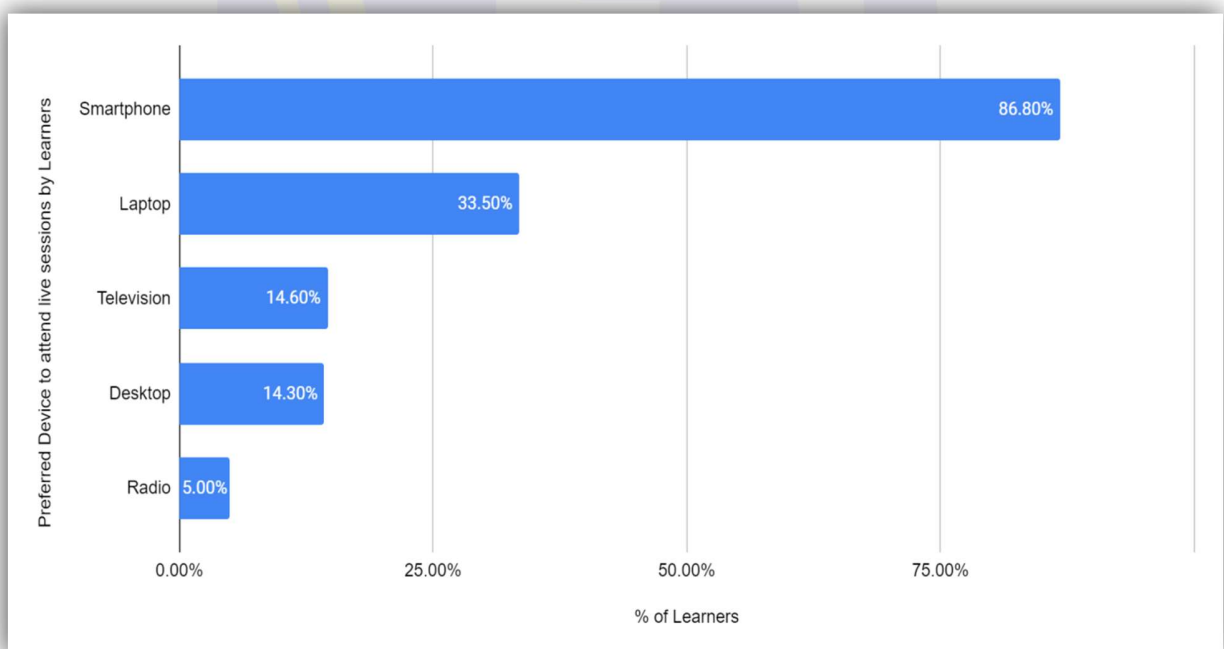


Figure 7: Preferred Device/s to Attend Live Sessions by Learners

The study also examined the digital platforms learners utilised for academic support (Figure 9). The NIOS YouTube channel was the most commonly used (72.8%) platform, followed by the

official NIOS website (46.3%), where all eContent based on self-learning materials (SLMs) and the SLMs themselves are accessible. Multimedia content, including audio, video, and Indian Sign Language-based videos, is available across various NIOS YouTube channels. Other platforms showed moderate usage viz. SWAYAM MOOCs (12.8%), PMeVidya TV channels (8.8%), and *Mukta Vidya Vani* radio (7.9%). Stakeholders' responses are also aligned with these trends (Figure 10), reinforcing the significance of NIOS's existing digital ecosystem. The consistent reliance on video-based platforms highlights a preference for visual content and the value of well-curated, subject-specific videos in promoting learner engagement.

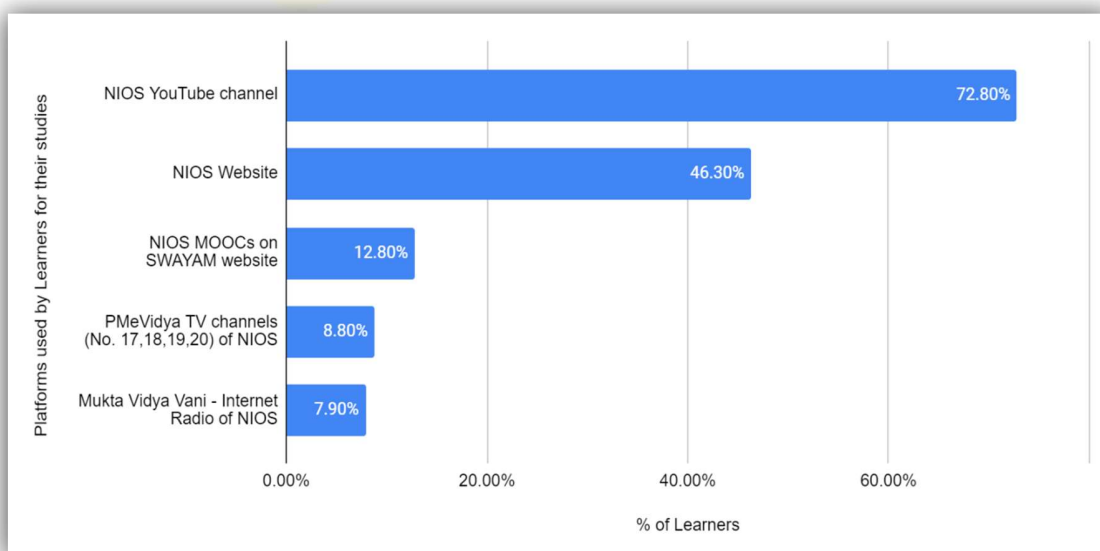


Figure 9: Platforms Used by Learners for Studies

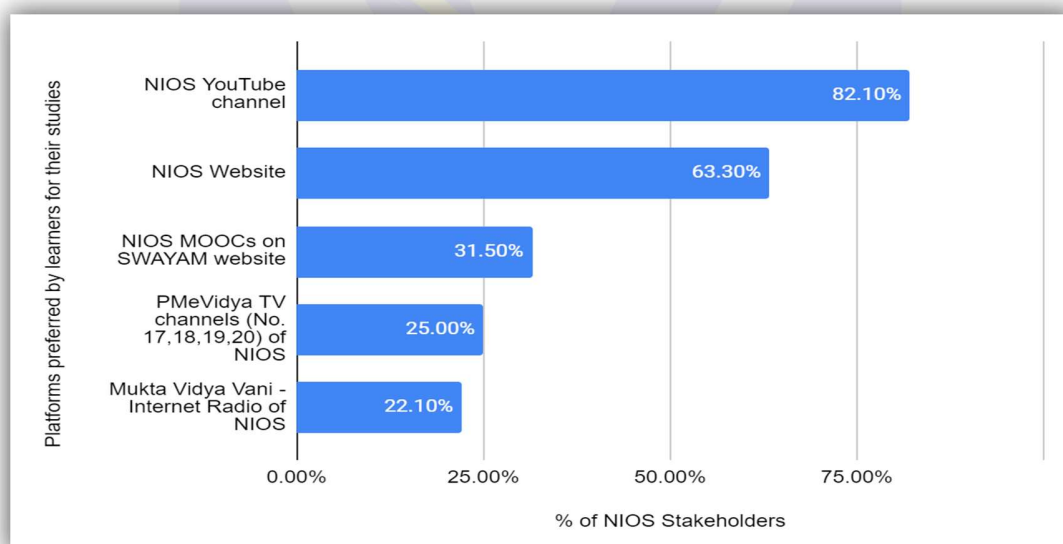


Figure 10: Platforms Preferred by Learners for their study as Responded by Stakeholders

Suggestive measures for Strengthening Academic Support

Learners and stakeholders offered suggestions for enhancing NIOS academic services, as reflected in qualitative data of the survey (Figures 14 & 15). Among learners, 23.09% expressed satisfaction with current NIOS support. Key recommendations from learners included strengthening ICT-based services such as a more receptive website, dedicated mobile applications, and real-time updates via WhatsApp and SMS. They also suggested improvements in administrative efficiency, timely delivery of study materials, and better approachable study centres.

Similarly, stakeholders also emphasised on leveraging technology, upgrading study materials, and ensuring regular PCP delivery. Both groups advocated for expanded training for tutors and coordinators, with a focus on pedagogical innovation, responsiveness, and learner-centric approaches.

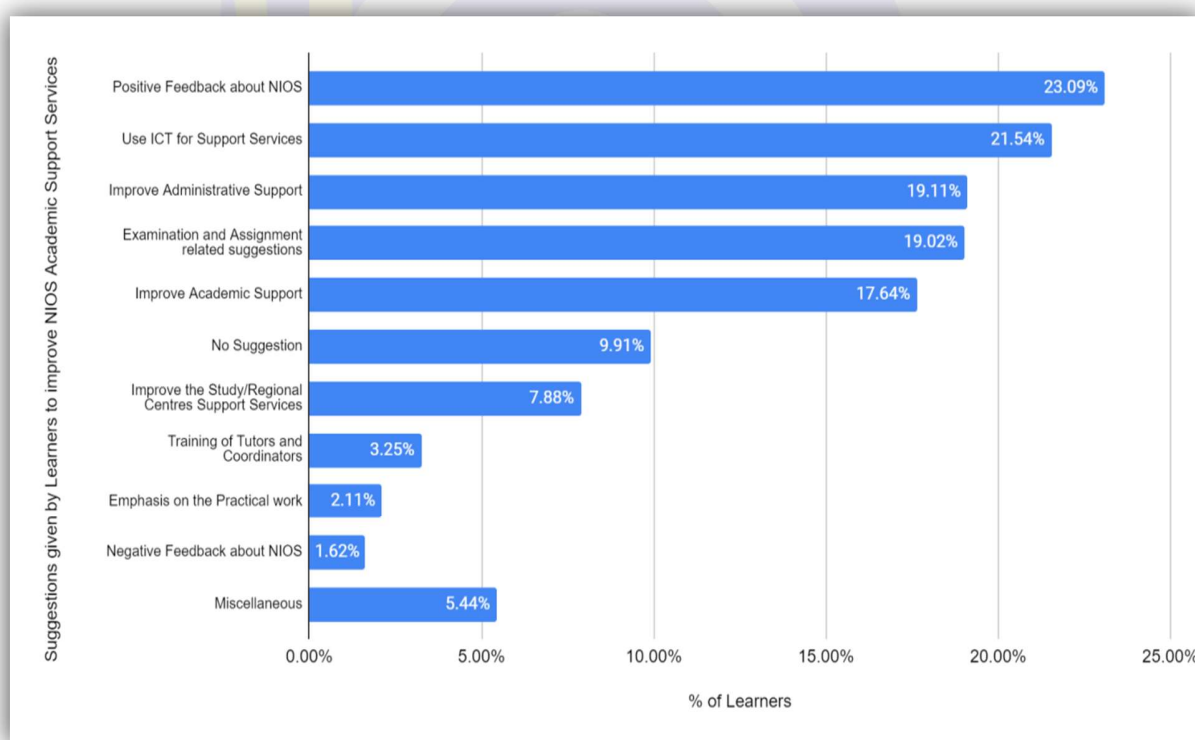


Figure 14: Suggestions by Learners to Improve NIOS Academic Support Services

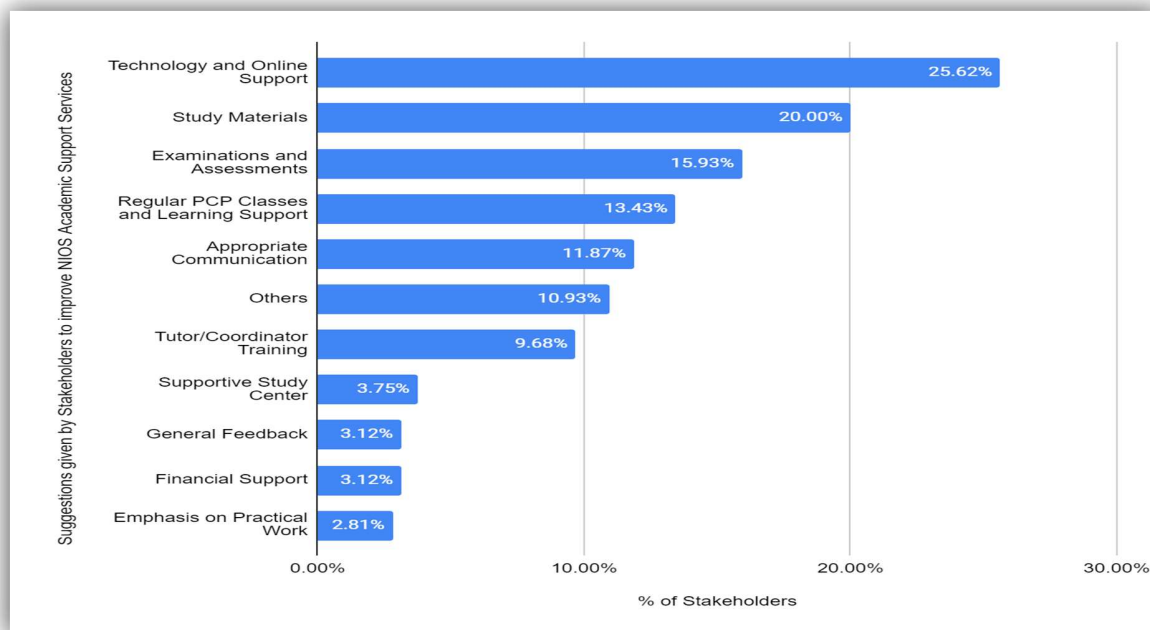


Figure 15: Suggestions given by Stakeholders to Improve NIOS Academic Support Services

Discussion and Conclusion

Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) offered by NIOS are interactive sessions designed to bridge the divide between independent self-study and formal classroom experiences. This study investigated the role and operational aspects of PCPs within the academic support system. Findings indicated that over half of learners participated in PCPs, with the majority of attendees finding the sessions useful. Nevertheless, a significant portion did not participate, highlighting gaps in outreach, communication, and accessibility.

Findings suggest that PCPs effectively support learners who attended, particularly in examination preparation and resolving study-related issues. Non-participation stemmed from inadequate information and communication about PCPs, long travel distances to study centres, tutor unavailability, and personal circumstances. These barriers call for institutional actions to enhance communication and mitigate logistical challenges. Institutions should also motivate learners and design more engaging PCPs to address personal deterrents. Motivations for attendance revealed PCPs' multifaceted role in academic assistance and peer interaction. It further highlighted the need for flexible, responsive PCPs design personalised to diverse learner needs. Learners preferred practical activities, visual aids, and collaborative tasks, emphasising the incorporation of varied teaching-learning methods.

The study further presents opportunities for ICT integration in PCP delivery, given widespread smartphone and internet access among learners. This enables online or blended PCP formats,

especially for those unable to attend in person. NIOS is already providing these type of PCP sessions via PMeVidya DTH-TV channels and *Mukta Vidya Vahini* Radio frequency. To facilitate ICT during PCPs, NIOS study centres require robust ICT infrastructure and qualified tutors experienced in dealing with digital modes. Learners already engage with platforms like NIOS YouTube channels and the web portal which supports expanding these resources for better learning.

In summary, while PCPs offer valued academic support, operational and systemic challenges persist. Timely information delivery and adequate communication, practical laboratory sessions (virtual as well as face-to-face), collaborative PCPs, and ICT utilisation may help in broadening reach and impact. Addressing these is essential for equitable access to academic support services across all ODL learners, irrespective of location, background, or institutional constraints.

Way Forward

The study's findings suggest actionable steps for open schooling institutions globally to refine academic support, particularly via PCPs. The following suggestions may help in strengthening PCPs for providing better learning experiences.

First, communication strategies must be strengthened through coordinated multi-channel dissemination (e.g., SMS, email, mobile apps, dashboard pop-ups, and official social media) to deliver timely PCP schedules, examination dates, and related updates.

Second, PCP accessibility requires review, including evaluating study centre distribution to minimise travel barriers and exploring online/hybrid models with recorded sessions and low-bandwidth options for remote participation.

Third, PCP content and structure should align with learner preferences, incorporating hands-on activities, interactive videos, group tasks, and peer engagement, while ensuring digital compatibility with prevalent devices like smartphones.

Fourth, ongoing tutor training should cover facilitating self-learning, ICT tools in ODL, and managing hybrid sessions, supported by regular feedback from learners and study centres to refine performance.

Fifth, administrative processes demand reinforcement, including prompt study material/eContent distribution, improved web portal and social media functionality, and better coordination between regional and study centres to minimise delays.

Finally, institutionalized, accessible feedback mechanisms involving learners and stakeholders should inform ongoing planning and adaptation to evolving needs.

By focusing on these suggestions, ODL institutions can strengthen the coherence and inclusiveness of their academic support mechanisms. When thoughtfully designed and effectively executed, PCPs can function as a fundamental component of the academic support strategies. It helps in supporting learners by bridging the gap of open & distance learning and formal learning.

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