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on

Empowering India through Open and Distance Learning:

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**A VENTURE TOWARDS EXPLORING THE MAJOR CAUSES OF STUDENT  
DROPOUT FROM THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE PROGRAMME AT NETAJI  
SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY, INDIA**

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### **Introduction**

Education can be described as the widening of consciousness and the liberation from restrictions in the cognitive and emotional fields. Education, which could be attained through various modes, including the distance-learning mode, is a basic right for every individual. Distance education can play and does play a very important role in the education and training of a country's human resources at various levels. It generally refers to the forms of study that are not under the continuous and immediate supervisors or tutors present in the lecture room, or on the same premises, but which, nonetheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and teaching of a supporting organisation. Keegan (1990) defines distance education as wall-less education, open learning, open teaching, non-traditional education, distance learning, distance teaching, correspondence education, independent study, home study, distance teaching at a distance, extension study, external study, external learning, flexible education, flexible learning, life-long education, life-long learning, contract learning, experiential learning, directed private study, drop-in learning, independent learning, individualized learning, resource-based learning, self-access learning, self-study, supported self-study or continuing education.

In distance education, performing humanities subjects are more feasible than the science subjects as teaching of science subjects needs a regular intervention of laboratory and onwards application by the learners. In this back-drop Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU), the leading Open University in Eastern India introduced five laboratory based science subjects viz., Physics, Chemistry, Zoology, Botany and Geography in the Bachelor Degree programme (BDP) from 2000-01 academic sessions. The goal was to increase the mindset of the students scientifically and its simultaneous uses in recent job markets. However, Open Distance Learning (ODL) is now considered as a reputable method of education as evidenced by the establishment of numerous ODL institutions worldwide and increasing enrolment of students in these institutions. In India, currently 22 percent of the total numbers of students enrolled in India's higher education system are enrolled in ODL institutions (Dikshit, 2003). Concomitant with the growth of ODL, there is the problem of high rates of student dropout. Research has shown that ODL student dropout rates are typically higher than student dropout rates in conventional, face-to-face forms of higher education (Kember, 1995; Barefoot, 2004; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). In this context the present paper aims to search the major causes of student dropout from the *Bachelor of Science Programme at Netaji Subhas Open University, India. The ideas generated from the study could shed some light in near future in higher education and thus the dropout rates in laboratory based science subjects could be minimised.*

### Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- Establish the main factors that led some distance students to drop out from the studies.
- Establish whether communication between the directorate of distance education and students contributed to the dropout rate.
- Establish whether employment interrupted students from studying.
- Establish whether the students would prefer to complete studies exclusively by distance learning.
- Establish that the constraints of laboratory class would be a reason for dropout.

### Significance of the study

It was hoped that the study would come up with the reasons that made the students to dropout from their studies, particularly in laboratory based science subjects. Possibly the solutions for slowing the dropout rate would also be outlined as per submissions of the students. Moreover, it was hoped that the study would influence to make a policy by the Government and onward implementation by the academic institutions pertaining to distance learning.

### Methodology

The authors used both the quantitative and qualitative procedures for survey. In order to bring out an accurate and adequate account of factors on the subject, survey questionnaires were used. The questionnaire consisted of 10 modules.

All together thirty six students were surveyed in this study. The population consisted of the dropout students from eight different study centres (randomly selected from both the urban and rural areas) of West Bengal, India. During selection of dropout students for survey, we took only the students enrolled within 2000-01 to 2009-10 academic sessions as Netaji Subhas Open University offers five years for completion of bachelor course.

Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze quantitative data, while content analysis was used for qualitative data.

### Results

- **Sex and religion of respondents:** Nearly 88.89% of the respondents were male and 11.11% were female. 100% of the respondents were Hindu by their religion. It seems to be a limitation of our survey that we could not reach the study centres covering the minority areas (figure 1).
- **Caste and age of students:** On an average 55.55% of the respondents were general in caste and 44.44% belongs to other castes, *i.e.*, S.C, S.T., OBC etc. 100% of the respondents were above 25 years old (figure 1). So, it was interesting to note that there is an intension among the over aged students to enrol themselves in any distance education institution.
- **Material status of students:** It was interesting to found that 55.55% of the respondents were married and 44.44% were unmarried (figure 1). So, marriage was not a problem for the students for their enrolment in distance education institution.
- **Distance from the study centres:** 22.22% of the respondents lived in rural places and 77.78% of the respondents lived in urban areas of West Bengal, India among the surveyed students. However, 83.33% of students travelled below 15 km distance from their residence to study centres and 16.67% of students travelled more than 15 km distance for their study (figure 1).

- **Monthly income of the family:** 16.67% of respondents were between Rs.5,000 and Rs.10,000 income group and 83.33% of respondents were above Rs. 10,000 income group (figure 1).

### Discussion

From the survey, it comes out that the students may opt for ODL because they think these programme/ courses will be easier as previously advocated by Carnevale (2000). In this context, Fozdar & Kumar (2006) opined that in distance education, students' expectations are shattered when they realized that ODL programme/ courses require the same efforts -- if not more -- than traditional programme/ courses which became true for the students of Netaji Subhas Open University as found in the survey report. It was reported that more than one-in-five undergraduates are failing to complete the first year of their degree at the worst-performing universities, it emerged, prompting fears that millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being wasted on unwanted courses (Fozdar & Kumar, 2006). At some universities, an estimated four-in-ten students will fail to finish the course they started after either dropped out, switching to another institution or graduating with a lesser qualification.

### Profile of participants

It was noticed that the majority of the students learning by distance were mainly in the ages between 26 and 45. 88.89% were males and 11.11% were females showing gender disparity. 89% of the respondents were in employment and self-sponsored. 88% stated that they never stopped studies at any time although they knew some of their colleagues who had discontinued their studies due to reasons such as:

- Lack of funds as they could not sponsor themselves.
- Being promoted at working place.
- Marital and family problems, especially for female students.
- No permission given to attend the compulsory study centre.

They suggested that in order to minimise the dropout rate, the government should:

- Extend government bursaries scheme to distance students.
- Give loans to be recovered later.
- More usage of information and communication technology for the students.

### Interruption of studies by employment

80% of the respondents believed that, in some situations, studies were interrupted by employment, while 20% disagreed. Those who agreed suggested how this problem could be sorted out, such as: study centre should not be compulsory but optional, course materials and assignments should be sent to the students who had failed to attend the classes in study centre, and employers should give study leave to their employees who were studying to enable them to attend the compulsory classes.

### Necessity of compulsory study centre for distance students

100% of the respondents agreed that the compulsory annual classes in the study centres was necessary because library facilities as well as practical classes assisted students to research for the assignments made them feel part and parcel of the university and enjoy the academic atmosphere on campus.

### Preference to complete studies exclusively by distance learning

98% preferred to complete their studies by distance learning because:

- They would have more time to attend the family commitments.

- Seeking sponsorship from government would not be necessary.
- They would find it easy to source funds for their studies.
- Since they would be working and studying at the same time, they would not miss promotion at their work places.

Respondents suggested other ways that would reduce the dropout rate amongst distance students such as:

- Government sponsorship should be extended to distance students.
- Study materials should be sent to the students early.
- Course materials should be posted through internet.
- Lecturers should set questions in relation to what they taught.
- Examination centers should be further decentralized to districts in order to reduce transport costs.

### Conclusion

From the study findings, it is clear that there were various factors (*viz.*, in search of jobs, time *constraints for the students, family economic problem etc.*) that contributed to the dropout rate among distance learning students at the Netaji Subhas Open University. But the interesting feature was that no one dropped out due the practical load and/or due to attending practical classes for the completion of their course curriculum. We are of a belief that such problems should be sorted out in order to slow down the dropout rate.

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