Administrative Improvement in bringing more Students in ODL Teacher Education Program: A Case of Kathmandu University, School of Education

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Abstract

There has been progress with the literacy rate of women, education level and increasing participation in male dominated professions in Nepal. However it is not the same in online and distance education. On the background that online and distance education program has recently commenced in graduate programs, women and learners from marginalized community have still not found better access to it. Women's less representation in online and distance programs of Kathmandu University, School of Education (KUSOED) challenges to some of the existing claims found in literature about more women appearing in online programs. This study aims to explore the reasons of less participation of women and learners marginalized group in KUSOED online and distance education programs from the purpose to improve the school administration and include more students. This is an action research where two phases of interview were carried out before and after the program intervention. There were 10 participants who were the applicants who did not get enrolled to the program after applying for it. The first phase of the interview helped in identifying the problems in administrative improvement. The problems identified were not have adequate information, not quick responses to the queries through online portal, not affordable fees and less representation of women and marginalized community. The program intervention were adding more information in the website (frequently asked questions), conducting awareness program, stating about the priority of applications from the targeted group in the admission announcement, providing scholarships and assigning program coordinators to directly answer with the queries of the applicants. The interview in the second phase explores that the reasons of not getting into the programs was more of personal choice influence by the family responsibilities and time management rather than the administrative provisions. The administration improved to bring more students after the intervention. The study explored that women's multiple commitments due to gender role is hindering to access the program than the school management system. However massive information needs to be communication in the society to mitigate the gap and attract more students to be benefitted from the online and distance education program.

Keywords: *Distance Education, Gender, Marginalized community, Online education, Technology, Women learners*.

Introduction

Technology is not only the buzzword for development in 21st century but it has become an inevitable part of everyday lives. The digital world has engulfed the people in such a way that its impacts have heavily influenced to both digitally competent and digitally illiterate people. In fact, there is widening of the digital gap and blurring of the physical gap at the same time. Education is one of the major domains where technology has made its dominant presence. It has observed even more vividly in higher education as it directly links to the employment market after the graduation. Undoubtedly, the present digital industry hires the candidates who have the competent digital skills.

This is the general trend in the global market of digital era.

Makewa, Kuboja, Yango and Ngussa, (2014) has advocated that integrating technology in education can bring enough digital opportunities and learning shifts from teacher centered to student centered. Definitely, technology also improves the pedagogy in schools and universities. Online and distance education have asserted to have created a new path which is more efficient and effective in increasing access and opportunity to higher education attainment (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014).

The impact of technology has not always been beneficial to everyone. Whenever the exclusion,

divide and marginalization is been brought to debate, education sector plays a prominent role both in bringing awareness of the situation and suggesting alternatives to it. The access to technology and internet has thus brought digital divide in the society. Kelland (2005) has argued that some learners are excluded from distance learning because of their lack of digital skills or confidence in using technology, which is a particular concern for female students.

The low representation of women in higher education is not only the reason of domestic responsibilities resting mainly upon them, but the lack of enabling environment and the stereotypes for instance women's technophobia. The universities programs are questioned many times when they are not able to reach to men and women equally. The less representation of women in higher education will negatively influence on their future career and participation in the productive workforce. While some studies shows that there is women are overrepresented among students who take online and distance courses (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014), some still presents the scenario of women being excluded due to lack of equipment, skills and confidence (Kellend, 2005).

Unless and until there are equitable strategies being adopted by universities in regard to gender and inclusion, simply raising of the issue will not solve the problem. In Nepalese context, there has been progress in the recent decades as per the literacy rate, rising education level of women and their increasing participation in previously male dominated professions and educational streams. However, when talking about the Nepalese women and ICT, there has been representation crisis with huge gender digital divide. Besides the government policies, the responsibilities also rest upon the universities in bridging the gender digital divide by offering more inclusive and women friendly programs in all levels.

Kathmandu University, School of Education (KUSOED) is one of the pioneer educational institution in Nepal that has been offering online and distance education programs especially in master degree programs since 2011. The launch of programs in online and distance education in master degree brought lot of expectations and aspirations in bridging the gap of digital divide. However due to various reasons, it has not been able to perform to its best expectation especially in including women. According to the estimated raw data, there has been only around one-fifth of the students as women. In addition, it is even less with the marginalized group. If the notion of access to education by anyone, anywhere and anytime, applies in online and distance education,

then where did the loophole lie? Why is there less participation of women and students from marginalized group in online and distance education? Do the demand of digital competency avoid them in their enrollment and retention throughout the programs in university?

Some of the nations such as India and Malaysia has been performing very well in education sector and ICT due to significant involvement of women in IT profession. The IT skills and level of education equally complement each other to grasp the opportunities of the modern society. The digital literacy is necessary at least in online and distance education program. The open universities in South Asia especially in India, Pakistan and China have become very effective in making higher education accessible to all. Nepal being the neighbor country to some extent shares the similar socio-economic context. So when KUSOED intended to offer the Master degree programs to the eligible candidates through online and distance education program in Nepal, why has the potential learners been not able to adapt this benefits? What administrative dodges exists to weaken or hinder the progress toward achievement of this goal?

This study aimed at exploring the reasons of less participation of female students in online and distance education program and improving the school management system to make the program reachable to many learners especially to women. The research questions were:

How the students were informed about the online and distance education program of KUSOED? How were they motivated to enroll?

What are the reasons that students failed to enroll themselves or were rejected to the online and distance education graduate programs?

Method of Study

This study is an action research limited to the students' experiences and perception with KUSOED management in including them to online and distance education graduate programs. The study was limited to the applicants of only three graduate programs; (i) Mathematics Education, (ii) English Language Teaching and (iii) Master's Degree in Sustainable Development. These programs were the pilot program under Norhed project that came in operation from 2015 A.D as provisioned. The project began from 2014 and will end in 2018. It was conducted in collaboration with Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University in Nepal and Oslo and Akershus College of Applied Sciences in Norway.

I have been working as a gender coordinator within this program since 2014 and therefore had the responsibility assigned to address the issues of

gender inequality in higher education through online and distance education within Kathmandu University. The responses from the unsuccessful candidate of 2015 batch was the first stage of the study to identify the problem. Then after the identification of problem interventions were done accordingly. The intervention helped to improve the practices in KUSOED online and distance education. The second interview were taken with the non-enrollees of 2016 batch. The intervention included sharing of participants experiences in the faculty meeting, adding FAQ (Frequently asked questions) in website, giving priority to women and marginalized group in the advertisement of admission open and visit to colleges in catchment area with awareness raising intention on online and distance learning (ODL) and information dissemination.

There were total 10 participants in this study. It was a census study as it included all the participants under the study period of the project. 8 students were from the first phase and 2 were from the second. Out of 10, 3 were female. There was one female in the first phase of interview and two in the second phase. Out of 10, there were again 3 participants from marginalized community especially from hill ethnic group, madhesi of terai and dalit. There were one third of women and one third of participant from marginalized community. The number was not the same in case of enrollment. There were less percentage of women and marginalized group among the enrolled students in both the batches.

Result

This section involves the data analysis from two phases of interview with the unsuccessful applicants and activities carried out in intervention phase. The intervention was based on the findings from the first interview. The first interview was mainly divided into two themes as stated in research questions. They were about the attraction towards Online and Distance Program and their experiences on why they couldn't succeed to get into the program.

Reasons for applying in online and distance graduate programs

In this study before asking the participants for not being able to join the program, they were asked on the reasons that made them to apply for the program. It intended to explore the flow of information to them, attractiveness of ODL program and the realistic characteristics that appealed them. As online and distance education is flexible in terms of time and space, it allowed many job holders to continue their study along with their work. A participant said, "*due to field based job and frequent visits to different district, online and distance mode was appropriate for me*". Another participant said, "*I can only afford a little time to study being occupied with my job so I thought I can manage ODL program with the limited time*". So it has been able to attract potential students who are facing time constraint in pursuing the higher education. A participant said, "*I work out of Kathmandu valley and I was attract by the ELT program of KU for my professional growth*". Some people find the ways to gain knowledge and enhance ability. They search themselves from the website, find the news from media and social network. One of the participant reported, "*I heard from my friend who is currently studying in KUSOED*". So the information was given to the applicants individually by the students, administrators and faculties of the university. It's a mouth to mouth advertisement and sometimes through social network. ODL program is not only about time and space but it is economically affordable too. It's affordable in compare to the other developed countries with almost similar ingredients. A student quotes, "*I stay in Australia and I can't afford the study fees here, so the online education program in Nepal was the best option for me*". This shows that ODL program reaches not only the remote areas of the country but it has been able to serve beyond the geographical boundary.

Reasons for failing to enroll in master degree programs

It has been found that besides having keen interest there are many reasons students are not able to stand out as eligible students and fulfill the requirements. The research participants were asked in regard to their perception about what made them unsuccessful for enrollment. The responses were "*I have no easy internet access while I go to field work*", "*I couldn't meet the school eligibility criteria*", "*I couldn't send all the necessary documents timely*". So for the success enrollment of students in ODL programs, it depends on the commitments and efficiency level of students too.

Even after dropping the application form for admission, some of the students of ODL program didn't wish to join the program. Some of them quit before the admission and some after the orientation program. The applicants were the hesitancy on the quality education of ODL mode comparatively with the face to face mode. It has been one of the challenges that ODL mode has been facing since its emergence in academia worldwide. The same challenges exists in Nepal

too. One of the respondent quoted, *"I want to get a quality degree and many of my friends suggested that I can't achieve it through ODL mode so I quit it before admission"*.

Many universities worldwide has made their courses free in online mode and some charges very minimal cost. In case of KUSOED, it has same fees for both ODL and face to face mode. So some of the applicants mentioned about the high fees in KUSOED ODL program which made them step back before the admission.

There is an online portal for applicants via KUSOED website where they can fill in the form without appearing to the University premise. There were few applicants who used this system but reported of dropping the idea to join KUSOED due to either having no responses or late response to their queries. Since ODL program in higher education is in its infant stage, the interested and potential candidates will definitely have lot of queries regarding its operation. Addressing to their queries will help them to finalize their choice with ODL program. But in the pilot phase of this program KUSOED ODL administration was not effective in responding them. The applicants expressed the following opinions;

"I filled the application form through online. I had send some questions as well but I never got any reply. I got bad impression then". Participant 1

"I had keen interest but I didn't get the response earlier. It was too late to have clear idea before enrollment". Participant 2

"I didn't get much information from the administration". Participant 3

It shows that if the responses through online were addressed timely and convincingly, there would have been much possibility to enroll those students in the program.

Problem Identification

The first phase interviews from the non-enrollees of first batch of pilot program has explored the challenges and problems the students are facing from ODL management of the university. According to their experiences, following problems has been identified.

- There was not adequate information for the students either from the office desk or KUSOED website
- The students sending their queries through online portal or emails were either not responded or lately responded.
- There is not much awareness on the ODL program about its modality, process and quality it offers.

- The program was costly as the fees was not affordable to some of the students.
- The representation of women and marginalized community was less.

Intervention Phase

After the problems were identified, from the interview with the research participants, discussion and meetings were held with KUSOED authorities, faculties and staff. The issues were discussed and activities were finalized for the intervention phase. There were various suggestions provided in the meeting and accordingly following intervention were made.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) – As there were insufficient information about the online and distance education program, applicants had the state of confusion. There were even confusions with the KUSOED staff and faculties about operating this system. The queries on ODL program were collected and uploaded in KUSOED website in form of FAQ. It dealt with differences between ODL and face to face mode, admission type, eligibility criteria, how to process courses, examination process, reading materials, syllabus, grades, interaction with teacher, cost of the program, assignments submission, preparation of skills and challenges that might come during the period of program.

Awareness campaign - There were less women applicants and from marginalized group in the pilot phase of our ODL program. So the awareness program was conducted as second intervention activity. Colleges and schools were visited in two districts (Palpa and Rupendehi). The visit revealed that there are more than three fourth of women studying in education stream in undergraduate programs of public colleges who are the potential candidates. While interacting with them, it was surprising to know that those students had not heard about online and distance education. They had no information.

Advertisements - KUSOED publishes its admission announcements in the national newspapers. It intended to reach to every corner of the country but still there were only few applicants for the program. So in order to bring women and marginalized group the priority for them was clearly mentioned in the admission announcement.

High fees of the program which was similar with face to face program was one of the reason to step behind for enrollment. The provision of scholarship to the meritorious females and marginalized communities was made.

Responding to queries – The other important problem that was reported by the research

participants was about their unattended queries. The program coordinators were assigned to quickly response to the emails or any comments in the website page related to their programs. These coordinators informed and clarified about their program in general and specific way.

Interview of Second Phase

The program interventions targeted to the second batch admission in 2016. There were comparatively more students this time. After the intervention phase, the interview was conducted with the two female students who couldn't get into the program. Both had attempted for English Language Teaching.

The first student explained that prior to the applying for graduate program, she completed her Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) from KUSOED and recently completed. According to her it was tough to manage her time for job, study and home. While doing her PGDE for a year and job at the same time, she had hardly time to spend with her family. She wanted to pursue for her higher education and applied. She said that she realized later that there will be short of time again for her and this time she couldn't pay to stay away from family time. The reasons why she rejected the offer in KSUOED was due to her own family responsibilities. However she said she would join the program a year later. The second student was totally new to the online and distance program. Her husband helped her to get the information and filled the application form for her from the front desk of the university. She wanted to earn the graduate degree. She said, *"I want to continue my study but I am not familiar with the technology. I rarely use emails and internet so when I got more information about the program, I was confident enough that I will be able to cope up with the technology mediate program in KUSOED".* She further said, *"The programs seems quite demanding for the digital skills and I think it's not suitable for me. I have never taken online courses and I would rather study in conventional campus".*

The two participants had no any comments to the administrative system of KUSOED. Both of them withdraw the program due to their family responsibilities and jobs. Though they wanted to continue their study, their availability of time challenged them and finally made to drop the idea of getting into the online and distance education program.

Discussion

The master degree programs offered through online and distance mode in KUSOED has become a benchmark in Nepal to initiate the ODL mode in higher education. However this mode has its own challenges. Some of the challenges can be addressed from the institutional level, some of them are national level and some are socio-cultural aspects. This study dealt with the institutional level and addressed the challenges as well. The administrative efficiency was improved to serve more students. In fact administrative efficiency includes the better student support system. So establishing administrative process and information management systems should be effective, transparent and overall student friendly (Tait, 2000). There is rapid growth of distance teaching and open learning institutions around the world (Brindley & Paul, 2004). However it is the initial stage in context of Nepal. Therefore the awareness among the learners nationwide had to be massively carried out. There is an immediate need of information dissemination widely. In the growing stage as well as after that students demand more of services and support from institutions (Brindley & Paul, 2004). So inorder to promote online and distance learning, a favorable administration is required which is not only the preconditions but are interpreted as elements of support (Zawacki-Richter, 2004).

ODL programs not only challenge the administration arrangement but also brings the need for faculty to be digitally competent and become efficient to deliver online teaching. Regarding national level, the government recently opened an Open University of Nepal. It's a milestone to spread the news nationwide regarding the easy access of higher education through online and distance mode. The third aspect is socio-cultural and this is uncontrollable to some extent. Distance and online learning has to be inclusive, accessible, flexible and cost effective. For example women have constraints of time, space, resources and have family commitments. A study carried out among the undergraduate women learners regarding their persistence in online degree completion explored that multiple responsibilities, insufficient interaction and demanding technology were the barriers to women's persistence (Müller, 2008). When majority of women are struggling to balance the multiple demands of their families and jobs, the technology driven online programs definitely even makes their work harder with limited time and inadequate skills. So this unavoidable challenges for women has posed threat to inclusive distance and online programs in Nepal to some extent. The representation of women in online and distance learning is encouraging in some countries and even outnumbered men but in some countries it is quite opposite. This study of Nepal shows that we

are still at the phase of making the ODL accessible to all and include more women to bridge the gap in higher education.

Besides the equal access, the gender friendly course content, pedagogy and developing cognitive learning are other debates to be explored in online and distance learning. Accessing the information, acquiring digital skills and time management of women may have specific needs that standard distance education programs may not be properly equipped to deal with (Patterson, 2012). So the feminist educators are advocating that bringing women in higher education through ODL is not just the question of pedagogy but also as one of social equality and social justice (Patterson, 2012).

In order to break the various myths related with quality education provided through ODL can be mitigated in condition with the massive information provided in the society. A survey carried out in USA showed that there is increasing number of students doing online education and online has been included in the strategic plans of universities. (Allen & Seaman, 2011). It also has shown the result of students' satisfaction in online courses and many of them believe that online education and instruction is much superior to conventional education. This is one of evident that the wrong perception regarding quality education of ODL is gradually being nullified by the growing number, increasing result and interests shown by the learners worldwide. Salazar-Márquez (2017) opines that though integrating technology to teaching-learning processes especially in online and distance education, if the student is a digital immigrant, he/she may face a double challenge by having to deal not just with the contents of curriculum but also the platform through which communication takes place. Thus the administrative support system marks its importance to facilitate students in overcoming those challenges through incentives, trainings, access to equipment and many others.

We all live in digitalized world but the study shows that the Nepalese students are less prepared or equipped and informed about the ODL mode in higher education particularly in the rural and suburban cities. The information gap have let many students to miss the opportunity. ODL service from KUSOED should not only attract the digitally advanced group of cities who are economically well off but should also cater the learners from marginalized group and women who occupy more than half of the population. The study showed the need of massive information dissemination in the society regarding the benefits of online and distance program which can be achieved at own place and own availability of time. Learners having economical and geographical constraint can be benefitted mostly due to the provision of scholarship. The orientation and training on virtual learning environment to the needy learners will also cater to the digital gap existed in the society among all gender, caste and class. The administrative management can be made efficient and improved but the multiple responsibilities due to gender role of women is the major hindrance in accessing the ODL programs. It can be only mitigated by educating with the right information about the benefits of online and distance programs. The digital skills should enable them to empower themselves. The technology should not be the cause of exclusion for achieving the goal of better education. And it equally implies to the learners from the marginalized community.

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