

THE ADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR WORKING PROFESSIONALS: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Distance learning is a specialized form of teaching and learning system where learners are connected with educational resources. This system is specifically designed to be carried out remotely by using electronic communication for those learners who aren't enrolled in educational institutions. Popular distance learning education includes video technologies, Webcast, MP3 recordings, videoconferencing, information delivered over internet, etc. Distance education can benefit students with scheduling or distance problems along with working professionals for who timing can be a problem.

Companies nowadays not only look for skilled professionals but prefer to hire people who have a professional degree along with the desired skill set. There are thousands of people in India who could not pursue a higher degree after their graduation and moved into the corporate sector. India as a whole is a developing country and most graduates join a job to support their family in monetary terms. Also for a labour intensive country like India, more men are required for field jobs. Hence, distance learning is a boon for such professionals because it is time flexible and cheaper than a regular program. The demand for distance learning education has also grown over the recent years. After privatization has set in the Indian scenario, education system has been hit hard leading to the growth of distance education. Along with creativity and technological advancements, distance education has been given a definite shape. This paper thus portrays, that programs like these are a good platform for working professionals to make their dreams come true.

Keywords: Degree, Education, Institutions, Job, Skill, Technology.

UNESCO report on progress towards 'education for all' it is noted that 'more than 113 million children have no access to primary education, 880 million adults are illiterate, gender discrimination continues to permeate education systems, and the quality of learning and the acquisition of human values and skills fall far short of the aspirations and needs of individuals and societies.' Education for all is far from being achieved in any reasonable timeframe using traditional methods. As another UNESCO report has noted 'A developing country has to find new methods that will dramatically improve both its children's schooling and its continuing education system.' (Moore and Tait, p.18)

Distance learning is an innovative way by which students do not have to be physically present in the class. The simplified definition is to provide education at a distance. It is one of the forms of education via which open online courses offers large scale interactive participation. Such courses can be either paced or self-paced, where in the latter one; an individual can

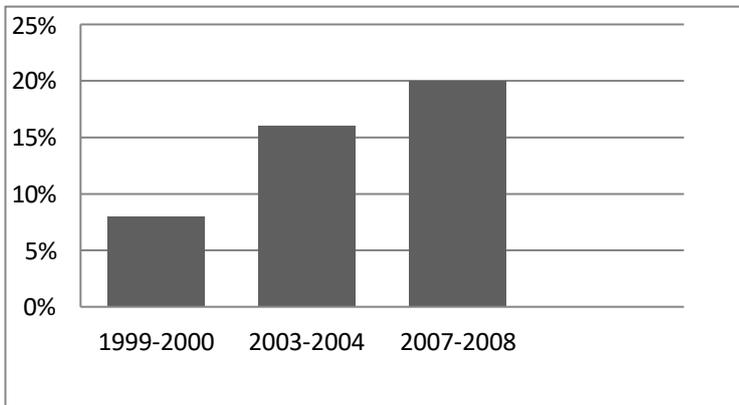
proceed with the course according to his time. With the advancement of globalisation, education is must to deal with preciseness, the situations one has to face. The world is moving into a digital phase, which has further eased the process of distance learning. It uses World Wide Web, as a major source and other network technologies. According to (Buselic, 23), the available methods of learning used in distance learning are divided into two basic groups: synchronous and asynchronous learning. The term synchronous learning is a mode of delivery where all participants are present at the same time. It resembles traditional classroom teaching methods despite the participants being located remotely. It requires a timetable to be organized. The asynchronous learning mode of delivery is where participants access course materials on their own schedule and so is more flexible. Students are not required to be together at the same time. The two methods can be combined in order to deliver.

Media is also considered as a major tool to provide such courses, like video-conferencing, mp3 recordings, webcasting, magazines, etc. Since distance is no longer an impediment to pursue a course and complete them as most universities have study and examination centres in many cities, the interest in Distance Education is growing very rapidly in India and is expected to double up in the next decade. Distance educations in India are of three types:

- Open Universities -They were originally set up to only offer programmes of study through distance education mode
- Dual Universities- These universities offer regular campus-based programs as well as distance learning programs
- Mixed mode Universities-Such universities offer a wide variety of modes of study to the learners - regular campus programmes, distance education through traditional methods like printed material and contact classes, and now the increasingly popular technology- based online degrees.

Also known as correspondence studies, distance learning was started in 1800's by Sir Isaac Pittman. Sir Isaac Pittman founded Sir Isaac Pitman's Correspondence Colleges in England in the mid-1840s. Correspondence courses took advantage of the then new rural free delivery of mail to deliver course material to students. Students worked independently on course material and interaction between faculty and students was limited to one-way communications. Within a few decades, correspondence courses were developed in Germany, Canada, Australia, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the United States (Matthews, 1999). The early students of distance education are generally those people who did not have a direct access to schools and universities, the ones who were living in geographically inaccessible areas. 'There is now widespread recognition that the way forward is to make greater use of open and distance learning (ODL), whether in the form of print-based distance learning courses, interactive radio, computer-based learning or web-based learning. These methods offer more education for the same unit of resource, easier access and higher quality than can be obtained by traditional methods in countries with poorly financed education systems.' (Moore and Tait, p.19)

Enrolment on Distance Learning course on the rise. ¹



Between 1998 and 2008, the number of students selecting distance learning courses increased by a whopping 150%. While 2008 is the last official tally of distance enrolment, projections show that online learning will not be slowing down any time soon.

In India, distance learning is coming into limelight; hence most universities are offering this course to meet the growing demand. It started in order to give education to those who were unable to attend and afford regular classes in universities and other conventional colleges., (Bijeesh) says, over the years, people have used various terms to refer to distance education - correspondence education, independent study, distributed learning, flexible learning, open learning and now with the introduction of technology into distance education, newer terms are cropping up - online learning, e-learning, computer-based training (CBT), Internet-based training (IBT) or web-based training (WBT).

Indian universities top the charts on the number of Distance Education courses at both undergraduate and post graduate levels. Most universities in India now have Distance Education programs offering a wide variety of courses. The Indian government while realizing the need for distance education opened the prestigious Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985, which offers students degrees widely accepted in the job market as any other recognized Distance Education course. The Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University was the first Open University to be set up in India in 1982. Now we have one national Open University (IGNOU) and 13 state open universities in India.

As per the data provided by the University Grants Commission (UGC), 2017 report, the total numbers of distance education institutes have increased to a great number till date.

Year wise growth of ODL Institutions in the Country.²

Year	Dual Mode Universities/ Institutes	Single Mode Open Universities	Total Distance Education Institutions
1962	1	-	1
1975	22	-	22
1982	34	1	35
1990	46	5	51
2000	70	9	79