



A Study of Distance Education to Enhance Employability of Students in Higher Education

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1. Introduction

As a catalyst for social and economic development, education has been imparted through formal and non-formal systems. In the past, providing formal education to the willing population was impossible for various reasons. Distance education (D.E.) has emerged as an alternative source of formal education and is user-friendly to the downtrodden of society. The reasons for sending wards to school are gaining knowledge and employment. Comparatively, the latter is more important than the former, supporting the individual's livelihood in a society. Employability determines students' success in Higher education, whether they earn a higher or lower salary, which everyone has been trying to achieve. When employment is denied to the educated individual, the duties and responsibilities of the welfare state are at stake, as are the cases of Higher Educational Institutions. However, does distance education increase the productivity and employability of students in the job market?

Education, skill development, and employability must go hand in hand if the relationship between academics and employability is to be sustained. Distance education Universities (DEU) should aim far more than merely launching courses and issuing degrees to distance learners. Attitude awareness, professional skills development, problem-solving, analytical learning and soft skills should find a place in distance education curriculum and syllabus, as the role of education and training is considered to be an integral factor for socio-economic development. Investment in distance education should witness healthy growth, for which academia in distance education should chalk out suitable strategies for increasing employability among distance learners in India. To increase employability among distance learners, the following strategies may be followed without any compromise: launching practical courses for socio-economic development, framing an effective curriculum for the development of professional skills, interdisciplinary approaches, Flexi-studies, organizing study forums and peer tutoring, making writing assignments compulsory, timely correction and feedback to the students, practical students support service, distance tutoring, supplementing education through media and posting of distance education faculties in distance education universities and implementation of academic-industry partnership in higher education level.

2. Objectives

With the following objectives, the study was carried out:

1. To understand the suitability of distance education courses offered through Distance Education Universities about employability.
2. To study the feasibility of launching highly productive distance education courses to make students' investment meaningful and profitable
3. To work out the strategies for developing employability skills among the students.

With the normative survey method, the study was conducted in consultation with various primary and secondary sources of distance education materials, including the recently published Education Policy of Open and Distance Learning from MHRD, New Delhi. As an outcome of the study, it is firmly believed that distance learners will be able to attain employable skills by understanding – how to select D.E. universities and courses, the nature of demand of the courses in society, individual efficiency and suitability for the courses, media and student support Services, interdisciplinary approach and academic and Industry Partnership.

3. Academic and Professional Competencies

A news article was printed on 9th November in The Times of India. It was a summary of the India Labour Report 2007. 90% of employment opportunities require vocational skills, but 90% of our college and school output has only bookish knowledge. Failure in quality education, lack of technical and vocational skills, and policy blunders make it imperative that our system of education, whether in the F2F mode or distance mode, needs a structural change. Few Indian universities offer technical courses for two turn-outs and graduates to increase their professional skills and employability. There is a difference between 'unemployed' and 'unemployable'. 'Unemployable' means you need the skills and the attitude to be gainfully employed. 'Unemployed'

means you have the proper skill set and attitude but have yet to find a job. As our former President of India, Dr. Abdul Kalam, highlighted in his discourse: "It is not unemployment that is the major problem; it is the question of unemployability that is the major crisis in this competitive world." According to the NASSCOM-McKinsey report, the Indian Industry will face its biggest challenge ever. A talent shortage of 3.1 million knowledge workers across the industry by 2010, compounded by the fact that only 25% of fresh engineers and a mere 10% of fresh graduates are employable. This is a shocking number because there is a massive demand in the industry but a short supply of skilled workforce. What would be the condition of distance education even if regular education results are alarming?

Graduates coming out of college have academic skills with a theoretical background. Lack of Soft and Life skills may hamper their career prospects at the interview stage. In the current environment, soft skills are as necessary as technical skills. SkillBridge is a programme that aims to make Indian youth employable. The Skills imparted through SkillBridge will make them confident and help them face the corporate. It is comprehensive training with a specific curriculum that includes written and Spoken English, business communication, resume writing and interview skills, pronunciation, etiquette, and leadership skills. SkillBridge Programme, Career Cuisine, Learning Management Programme, Soft Skills Programmes, and Employability Enhancement Programme may be carefully designed and launched for the welfare of distance learners. These innovative courses will undoubtedly increase the employability skills of distance learners.

4. Evolving New Courses

Most Indian Universities offer courses to cater to the needs of distance learners such as students, teachers, women, employed and unemployed youth and others to improve their educational qualifications to enhance their livelihood. However, it is unfortunate that Universities existing within the 40 to 60 Kilometres jurisdiction launch the same kind of traditional courses. Since there is no chance for specialization in any subject, teachers and other adults have five M.A. degrees with shallow knowledge. This meaningless proliferation of knowledge cannot make them employable in the job market. Hence, the following innovative courses may be launched with appropriate curriculum and syllabus to cope with modern trends.

- M.A. English Language Teaching
- M.A. Language Studies
- M.A. Language and Cultural Studies
- M.A. Applied Linguistics
- M.A. Computational Linguistics
- M.A. e-Learning
- M.A. Natural Language
- M.A. Outsourcing
- M.A. Career Counselling
- M.A. Communication
- M.A. Communicative English
- M.A. Functional English
- M.A. Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL)
- M.A. Subject Communication
- M.A. Classroom Communication
- M.A. Educational Communication
- M.A. Instructional Design
- M.A. Educational Technology
- M.A. Extension Education
- M.A. Multi-media Education
- M.A. Business Communication
- M.A. Life skills
- M.A. Ethical Studies
- M.A. Broadcasting Studies

5. Flexi-study

According to Richard Freeman, Flexi-study is a system of study that offers distance education to distance learners from Central Headquarters and asks local institutions to supplement and support this kind of teaching. The local college will have to take complete responsibility – teaching, tutoring, correcting assignments, organizing practical works, offering academic guidance to project or dissertation works – to boost the positive public opinion about distance education universities among the reading public and employers in India. The parent university will award the degree certificates after the public examination. With this approach, it is possible to develop subject proficiency and professional competencies among distance learners, as they have regular weekly F2F classes. The students have more access to contact their lecturers to clear their academic doubts. The newly proposed and highly innovative social science courses and practical-based science courses should be launched through the Flexi system after tie-ups with regional higher education institutes. A study conducted By (Doss, 2002) found that 75% of the Delphi experts supported Flexi-study, whereas 22% were against it. In India, a few Central Universities do similar studies in the name of Twinning programmes to enhance the quality of distance education.

6. Students' Support Services

Distance learners with various backgrounds are isolated from other students, teachers and institutions. To remove them from isolation, the distance education system recommends the singular narration of distance education lessons, didactic communication through the evaluation of assignments and exchange of feedback, and academic meetings at the study centres. Nevertheless, counselling is necessary because it is the only way of clarifying needs and reconciling conflicting demands of home and work. It includes informing, advising and counselling, teaching and tutoring. Approximately 60% of students ask for counselling support at some point in their student's careers. If improper counselling is offered to distance learners by the untrained local faculty at the study centres, it could be fatal to them. Development counselling on pre-entry, entry, course choice, career choice, withdrawal and motivational aspects and Problem-solving counselling on institutional, personal, study, assessment and time will help students, unemployed and employed persons to realize the goal of education timely through distance mode. It is a pity that most students study courses either through regular or distance mode without knowing the career prospects of the particular courses they are pursuing. Since this is the condition of the students, how can they improve their employable skills? Therefore, proper counselling by audio and video cassettes, interactive video, and CASAID (Careers Advisory Service Computer Aid can be offered to distance learners to understand their employable skills and suggest ways to acquire them timely before employment. The Pondicherry Women's Commission, in collaboration with the Directorate of School Education, launched the "Telephone-Mediated Educational Guidance Programme for School and College Students" on 7th January 2010 in order to guide students about course and career choices.

Only a few Universities have placement Cells, but there are hardly any Guidance and Counseling Units or Student support services on the premises of Indian Universities and colleges actively offering guidance to meet the academic and non-academic needs of the students. When the following career Modeling designed by Dr M.Doss (2009) was shown to a group of collegiate students who are pursuing literature at the undergraduate level in regular colleges, they had known only 8 -10% of the courses, and the same happened when it was shown to the group of teachers. Out of 33 job opportunities mentioned in the Career modelling, only 5 -7 jobs were identified, even by teachers teaching English at a Higher secondary level. Some of them shared their views that it could have changed their lifestyle if they had known about it earlier.

Fig: 1 English Course and Career Option

HSC

Three years

B.A., English Literature

B.A., Functional English

B.Sc/B.A.Any degree

(with English as a Part I/II subject.)

Integrated two years

M.A. English

5-years M.A., English Literature

M.A., English Language Teaching

M.A., English Studies

M.A., Linguistics

M.A., Translation Studies

M.A., TESL

M.A., Functional English

M.A. English and Communication

One year 3 -5 years

M.Phil. Specialisations Ph.D. Specializations

British Literature British Literature

American Literature American Literature

African Literature African Literature

Indian Fiction Indian Fiction

Indian Writing in English Indian Writing in English

Linguistics Linguistics

Computational Linguistics Computational Linguistics

English Language Teaching English Language Teaching

Diaspora Studies Diaspora Studies

English Studies English Studies

Translational Studies Translational Studies

Comparative Literature Comparative Literature

Journalism and Stylistics Journalism and Stylistics

Communicational Studies Communicational Studies

English for Specific Purposes English for Specific Purposes

Feminism Feminism

Career Options for those who studied English as a main subjects at UG/PG Level

Teacher

Lecturer/Asst. Professor in college/University

Journalist

Language Trainer

Soft skill Trainer

Freelance Writer

Content Developer

Call centre Supervisor

Corporate Manager

Public Relation Officer

News Reader for T.V. and Radio

Radio Jockey

Editor for electronic and non-electronic media

Translator

Interpreter

Writer

English Language Consultant

e-Publishing and editing

Computational linguists

Linguists

Communication Experts in Corporate centres

Receptionist in Hotel/Motel

Announcer in Air India/Indian Railways

Event Manager

Tourist guide

Commentator/Compere

ELT Book writer (Material Production)

Lexicographer

Civil servant

Administrative Officers

The various departments in Indian Universities should display course choices from other universities and career opportunities from various sectors, including industries, for the students. This could motivate them properly while seeing it every day and help them sustain it till they achieve their goals of education. He should search for other essential skills for survival in this highly competitive world. The following flow chart will re-affirm it.

Proper guidance --- Motivated status --- Concentration on Studies --- Development of Academic skills --- Proper and timely guidance on the development of Soft and Life skills through Students Support System(SSS) --- Employability.

7.Credibility in Distance Education

The National Policy on Education (1986) says: "Lifelong education is a cherished goal of the educational process...opportunities will be provided to the youth, housewives, agricultural and industrial workers and professionals to continue their education of their choices at the pace suited to them. The distance education system has been initiated to augment higher education opportunities. India has one of the largest science-qualified workforce Nations but no scientific workforce (Mukhopadhyay,1997). A scientific workforce implies knowledge, skills and a scientific attitude. Since globalization is inherently a business connotation, India and other developed countries will face unequal competition in a competitive global market. In order to counteract these challenges, distance education has to take the lead in creating the required knowledge, study skills, and dexterity to keep pace with the latest advancements in distance education. Public and employers should have faith in distance education and the degrees they are awarding, especially in the corporate sector. 55 – 60% of the institutions and companies in India discard distance learners for employment on various grounds. Hence, distance education universities should carefully design courses to increase employability among distance learners to make the reading public believe that D.E. is in no way inferior to regular education. If any university takes the following steps to improve quality in D.E., it can increase credibility among the employer and the public.

- i. Self-study materials written with singular narration, Teacher is hidden with interspersed questions and self-check exercises and teaching the text
- ii. Teaching through UGC-Country comprehensive classroom Open Channel, Radio/F.M. Mode/T.V./Comp.: Teachers' role Supplementary and Complementary teaching, using Media.
- iii. Writing responses for course Assignments and: Students' responsibility making it compulsory for all students
- iv. Provision of feedback to the students with grades: Presence of teachers after correcting the assignments. This should be made compulsory without compromising.
- v. Didactic communication between the teacher and the possibility of interaction students while correcting assignments.
- vi. Chance of re-writing responses for assignments to get higher grades. : Remedial teaching
- vii. Meeting teachers at the Study/Regional centres: F2F teaching/interaction
- viii. 25 marks for assignment responses: 75 marks for theory: should make compulsory: Scheme of examination

All the characteristic features explained in the column above reflect the formal academic procedures of regular education, and therefore, one need not doubt the credibility of DE.

8. Interdisciplinary Approach for Increasing Employability

Employability implies something about the capacity of the graduates to function in a job. This capacity has to be nurtured among the students by introducing innovative curricular processes in the form of an interdisciplinary approach because the curricular process facilitates the development of pre-requisite skills for employability appropriate to employment. When students of Tamil literature have exposure to computational linguistics or translation techniques from the Department of English and Computer Science by completing 15-20 credits a year, along with a regular curriculum, it could be easy for them to acquire a lucrative career in the job market or at least he will work as Freelance translator or a Technical Writer in Software industry till he gets a permanent job. If any University has a genuine concern for the welfare of the students, they may go with an interdisciplinary approach. The examples are as follows, and they are not exhaustive.

Students of Literature: Should complete one or two papers in

Mass communication/Journalism/Media

Studies by attending classes in the respective departments. (Credit based).

Focus on Cultural Anthropology/Applied Linguistics.

Science and Commerce students: Soft skills and reporting; Presentation and communication techniques.

Computer science: Language and Linguistics, Statistics

Administrative sections of the University

Bio-informatics and Bio-technology units for Data analysis using Data mining tech.

History and Archeology: Paper on Preservation from Biology and Chemistry department.

Documentation techniques from the Dept of Mass Communication & Media Studies.

Techniques of interpretation and offering

Explanation from dept of Humanities.

9. Study Forum and Self-help Group in Developing Skills for Employability

Distance learners with like-mindedness may join together to discuss the issues of employability being published in the English dailies, especially in The Hindu on Classified Advertisement, advertised every Wednesday. People with experience in Corporate lines write a lot of articles on the behavioural patterns of employees and other issues, and the learner will quickly understand the expectations of the employers. The following are the suggested fields where one can equip himself if he sincerely uses the expertise available.

- Paper presentation
- Discussion on Newspaper cuttings
- Mock interviews
- Improving Spoken English with like-minded people
- Organizing Workshops for Writing Skills

10. Industry-Academic Partnership

Education is a catalyst for all development processes, whereas the lack of training opportunities constrain the individual to produce constructive work. Hence, exposure to work culture should be provided to the students. This could be materialized when Universities tie up with local industries and National-level laboratories with MoU. Not only does this approach develop confidence, but it also augments employable skills among the youth. The following are suggested as a few guidelines for the partnership programme.

Students of Literature: Visit to the Newspaper industry, Writers

Workshops/Creative Forums/

Visit the Higher Learners' Institute

Communication Lab.

Science students: Industrial visits/ Project discussion

Computer science and I.T.: Software and outsourcing units

Translation and Computational units

Bio-statistics of Medical units

Tele-Medical unit

Exposure to Banking Technology

History and Social Science: Museum & Units of Archeology with

Live projects

Cultural Study Centres

Commerce and Trade: Banking sectors/Share Market analysis

Exposure to Banking Technology

11. Conclusion

As an innovative instrument of democratizing education to all sectors of people, distance education has been widely recognized as an alternative tool to elevate the downtrodden from lower strata to higher strata by offering equitable education through distance mode. Sri. Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, said: our endeavour is that in India, the poorest, the most backward children receive the best possible education, and in this direction today, we are here to take a step forward. The Distance mode will extend educational opportunities to all the concerns of country..." The current concern is to make distance learners employable by imparting employable skills to them for survival purposes.

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