UNIT 11 : DISTANCE EDUCATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to-

- explain the meaning and significance of Open and Distance Education;
- identify the challenges in Open and Distance Education;
- explain the challenges faced by the learners in Open and Distance Education;
- discuss the problems faced by the teachers of Open and Distance Education;
- enlist the challenges faced by the Institution offering Open and Distance Education; and
- identify some of the possible ways to remove the barriers and challenges.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Education (ODE) has been around for the last 30-35 years. It has been observed that higher education has taken a new turn following several institutions offering courses through the Open and Distance mode. Moreover, in the most recent years, we have also seen the emergence of new mechanisms and tools to support open and distance learning following which many changes have occurred in the field of ODE. For example, the previous practice of distributing printed learning materials by post to the distance learners has become obsolete following the successful integration of ODE with new media, ICT tolls and so on. However, one should not forget the fact that three parties are always involved in ODE i.e. distance learners or students, the teachers or faculty members, and the institutions or the universities offering distance learning. Although, ODE has experienced a revolutionary development in the 21st century in the entire globe, all the three parties mentioned have been facing lot of barriers and challenges that have hindered the effectiveness of ODE which has otherwise great potential for a promising growth and acceptance. This unit, while discussing the meaning and problems of DE will also deal with the barriers and challenges faced by ODE in a country like India along with the means of overcoming those challenges.

11.3 MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Thus, Open and Distance Education (ODE) has emerged as a mode of learning through which education can be accessed by people irrespective of age, gender, physical and geographical and social barriers, time and space. In today's knowledge-based society, ODE has been perceived as one of the most demanding means of education for the people in general. The 11th Five Years Plan of the Government of India has made a target to cover around 40% the total student population under ODE. Today, due to its inherent flexibility, due to the presence of the 3As i.e. Anytime, Anywhere and for Anyone, this system has ideally gained unprecedented popularity.

The basic objective of this system has been democratization of education in a country like India. Better access, lower costs, greater flexibility, high quality are some of the objectives of Open and Distance Education. In the words of Perraton (1981), distance education is "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space/ or time from the learner." According to Ochoa (1981) "distance education is a system based on the selective use of instructional media both traditional and innovative that promotes the self-teaching learning process to achieve educational objectives, with a potentially greater geographic coverage than the traditional face-to-face system of education."

Open and Distance education has a long history. Earlier, it was known as correspondence education which refers to a system of teaching-learning where teachers and learners had no face to face contact. They interacted only through postal correspondences. Print had been the only medium of instruction and the printed lessons were the only source of learning for the learners. Correspondence education took formal shape in England in 1840 through Issac Pitman who started using postal tuition to teach shorthand to many of his students spread all over England. At the international level, distance education was started in 1883 when a private tutor taught English composition to his students by post providing two-way communication. Later, the scope of Correspondence education was widened terming it as distance education under which various forms of Learner Support Services (LSS) were provided for effective teaching-learning processes. In distance education, LSS and a variety of evaluation methods are an important component. Apart from the print media, it also includes the non-print media such as radio, telephone, audio cassettes, video cassettes, computer and other electronic and social media.



LET US KNOW

Open learning was named in one of the issues of the Pitman's Journal in 1929 (Rowntree, 1992) long before the first open university in the world i.e. UKOU was established in 1969. Pitman was the pioneer who introduced

the shorthand education through correspondence system for the first time. Open learning and open education are closely associated. Today, the open and distance learning is the most popular system of learning through which people can easily access global learning in his or her own door step.

Thus, based on the above discussion, distance education means the following:

- Separation of teachers and learners
- Institutional accreditation
- Use of mixed-media courseware
- Two-way communication
- Possibility of face-to-face meetings
- Use of industrialised processes
- Use of blended/online mode for teaching learning transactions

The ODL system is the corridor through which diverse groups of people, who were once deprived of higher education for one reason or the other, can pursue life-long learning in a flexible and cost-effective mode. These groups/sections of the population include the following categories of people/learners:

- those who dropped out from schools and colleges on economic compulsions and are now engaging in trade, business etc;
- women who got married early and discontinued their education in schools and colleges;
- those who work in offices and industries without completing degrees, diplomas required for their professions ;
- Home makers who simply could not carry on their studies in the conventional system in time and now are desirous to pursue education;
- those who want to get further education for ensuring better employability in future
- in-service persons or professionals to enhance their professional qualifications and training while on the job.
- Fresh learners who want to take more than one degree at one point of time.

Whenever we talk about the growth and development of distance education it has passed through many stages. In this connection, Prof. James C. Taylor had divided distance education into five generations, which are as follows:

- Correspondence model based on print technology
- Multimedia model, based on print, audio and video technology
- Tele-learning model, based on applications of telecommunications technologies providing synchronous communication
- Flexible Learning model, based on online delivery via Internet
- Intelligent flexible learning model, based on advanced online technologies

21st century ODE includes the following important aspects :

- Delivery Interactive multimedia, CD-ROM Internet based tutoring
- Learner Support Enhanced quality interaction anywhere, anytime
- Synchronous & asynchronous communication
- Equal opportunity for learners to participate/contribute
- Interpersonal interaction- tutor, learner, peers
- Social Networking and Collaboration

Thus, it has been seen that the ODE in our country has already crossed many phases but still it has a long way to go in providing quality education to all.

11.4 CHALLENGES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Open and Distance Education (ODE) has been an increasingly important aspect of higher education in today's world. It has succeeded in meeting the needs of an expanding range of learners who find education necessary in their life. Although ODE provides a convenient, flexible, and manageable alternative for the deprived learners in our society, it has never been free from challenges. Hence, every ODE institute must try to first understand and identify these challenges, and then devise solvable measures to these problems. For example, one of the most common problems in ODE is the 'absence' of the teacher, an issue having a deep

pedagogic significance. However, in the following subsections, we shall try to discuss in some length, some of the most common barriers and challenges faced by ODE in general.

11.4.1 Challenges faced by the Learners

The following are the challenges faced by the learners of ODE.

- Perhaps the most important problem faced by the learners of ODE is the feeling of isolation and marginalisation. As 'face-to-face' contact is not considered a regular part of ODE, most learners often feel the absence of the 'real' person to talk to, and communicate his/her understanding and confusions. This is one of the major problems faced by the ODE system in general, although of late there can be seen a significant growth in the processes of providing guidance and counselling to the distance learners through various means. Besides the feeling isolation, the challenges of bridging the 'gap' between the teachers and the learners within a new and technologically advanced learning environment have made room for serious discussion. Hence, issues like tutorials, contact and counselling sessions, mentoring and providing guidance have to be re-considered as part of the 'real' interaction between the teachers and learners in relation to the changing educational processes.
- There is no denying the fact that without the Learners Support Services (LSS), ODE cannot function. These services can very well address the academic and personal problems of the learners with the objectives of solving their problems and providing them regular feedback on their performance. As the obscene of regular and direct contact with the learners remains a common characteristic feature of the ODE in general, a strong Learners Support System needs to be ensured. Although Support Services are numerous, in matters relating to Counselling and Feedback, Up-to-date study Material, Media Support Services etc., the learners are facing different types

of problems because of the 'distance.' These problems have added more to the sense of isolation in the distance learning process complicating the things further.

- Learning Materials in printed form can stimulate the knowledge-base of the learners to a significant extent. However, the problems relating to the question of acceptability still lingers. Can such materials directly claim usefulness as a strong learner support service? Can they really be used as substitutes of the teachers as these materials are emphatically called 'the teacher in print'? Alternatively, do the learners need some external help other than the learning materials? These are actually some of the challenges to be considered very seriously.
- Generally speaking, nearly all distance learners in the developing countries like India often face insecurities due to reasons like—common perception of the society against ODE, the perceived irrelevance of the studies they have undertaken, lack of adequate support from the employers, and above all, their feeling of isolation after graduating from an ODE institute. Such issues need to be taken seriously, without which these problems shall remain as problems.
- Many of the distance learners often find that the instructional design as well as the course contents in study materials does not meet their needs. This has been a serious problem for those learners who are first timer to the system. Poorly designed course materials may contribute to the attrition rates. However, one may argue that the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has eased many of the difficulties of the learners. But, the learners hailing from the most remote areas as well as difficult terrains don't usually have any access to ICT for learning purpose.
- Another common problem in ODE is the lack of student-to-student communication. Unlike in the conventional mode, where the students are taught in group environment and where

students can learn and share information with their peers, ODE, as an educational system, is not based on much peer-to-peer interaction. Without this type of a communication, distance education programmes usually turn out only to be the transfer of information, not learning in the true sense.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1: What should be the role of ODE institutions in meeting the challenges?

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Q. 2: Do you think that the feeling of isolation on the part of the learners is a big problem in an ODE institution?

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Q. 3: Make a list of the common problems of distance learners in the developing countries.

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Q. 4: What type of communication problems exist in ODE?

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11.4.2 Challenges faced by the Teachers

The following are the challenges faced by the teachers and educators of ODE.

- Many teachers/educators/faculty members of ODE often face the problem of their service tenure, as many ODE institutions in the developing countries either do not have permanent teaching staff or have only a few permanent staff. The unacceptable terms and conditions of appointment, especially in the field of ODE in a country like India, have made many of the prospective teachers confused before joining an ODL

institute. This means that ODE institutions have failed to absorb serious and competent people as teachers in this system of education.

- As the Self Learning Materials (SML), both in print and electronic format, is the backbone of any ODE system, lot of serious efforts usually goes into the design and preparation of distance learning material. This tremendously increases the workload on the part of the teachers who are also the course writers, editors, and instructional designers. Besides, the teachers and educators in ODE need to perform several clerical jobs, which eat into their own reading time thereby affecting their knowledge base significantly. Thus, the nature of work on the part of a distance teacher turns out to be more of a manager than of a teacher.
- Another challenge that needs to be taken up is the presence of learners belonging to different age groups. The fact is that the learning ability among the learners of different age groups can never be similar. When a large majority of the distance learners are adults and beyond the age of 40 years, the teachers/educators may find it quite challenging to teach them by changing their teaching style. And, this is not an easy task. Only properly trained and experienced learners can only do that and this type of teachers are very hard to get at this stage of ODE.
- Due to the paucity of sufficient human resources, many ODE institutions are dependent on the teachers of the conventional mode of education in the capacity of course writers, editors, counsellors, evaluators and so on. However, the fact is that many of them who are teaching or associated with the conventional system, might not like the idea of distance learning or might not want to be associated with the ODE system. So long as the teachers from the regular mode colleges and universities consider their association with ODE to be a burden,

there will be little support from them toward distance education. This has harmed the system like anything.

- Challenges related to the use of ICT are yet another problem for the teachers of ODE. To make use of the modern education technology, it is of paramount importance that modern cyber parlour or video conferencing should be established making the use of computers mandatory. Thus, a new mindset with creative environment is essentially imperative. However, are the existing teachers and educators in ODE well-versed with the use of modern technologies of communications, is perhaps the biggest question when a country like India is experiencing a quantum leap in introducing OERs (Open Educational Resources) and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) for the benefit of the distance learners. Besides, technology phobia in the teachers is yet another associated challenge in this regard.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 5: ICT has enabled the distance learners to learn better. But ICTs sometimes also pose problems? Do you agree?

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Q. 6: How is the general attitude of the teachers and faculty members regarding ODE in general?

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Q. 7: Why is it that the ODE system has failed in attracting competent teachers?

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11.4.3 Challenges faced by the ODE Institutions

Many ODE institutions including the open universities in a country like India are trying to take cognizance of the challenges faced by the learners. But, many of these institutions themselves are facing lot of challenges. The following are some of them.

- In several of the ODE institutions across India, academic programmes are run based on the tried and tasted methods only. However, there has been an increase in alternative work arrangements with flexitime and work-at-home arrangements on the part of the learners. Therefore, the ODE institutions may devise programmes that promote greater individual responsibility as well as learner autonomy. Besides, as the social patterns too are changing, learners should be encouraged to balance their academic involvements with commitments to work. Therefore, the ODE institutions of the present times must change their educational patterns to cater to the needs of the newly emergent learners in the 21st century context. But, many of the Open Universities are not seen to have adopted any measures to tackle such problems so far.
- In matters relating to the use of technologically-aided education for the greater benefits of the learners, the ODE institutions need to formulate a clear ICT policy in the absence of which the implantation process always becomes a problem. Besides, there cannot be an adequate learning environment without a proper institutional policy. In the absence of a policy, the last person on the queue may be missed out. This has been one of the biggest problems in the field of ODE.
- Integration of Technology into teaching learning transactions needs adequate investment and funds. In addition, in many of the private ODE institutions, the learners are forced to incur various costs such as the cost of technology. Learners might decide not to join the course of that institution and the problem

continues. Besides, technology changes everything, not merely add something new. New technologies wage war against old ones. Therefore, while planning to introduce new technology, the ODE institute must try to ensure for how long a particular technology is going to last and benefit the learners.

- The common belief is that distance courses are inferior to traditional courses. This reduces the motivation of teachers and students to a significant extent. This is one of the biggest challenges faced by the ODE institutions in India. To prove this belief wrong, the ODE institutions or universities, with serious and concerted efforts, need to ensure the quality in content and delivery of distance learning courses, so that they are never inferior to any of the regular on-campus courses. Similarly, the ODE institutions must try out some measures to incentivise their employees as a means of increasing output, which may in turn attract competent persons to join this system. However, there is a lack of good will among the administrators and policy makers of ODE.
- Assessing student performance is yet another big problem on the part of the ODE institution. How assess learners' performance and their learning outcome, once they pass of that institute? So far, very few ODE institutes have taken cognizance of that matter, as the success rate in the Indian higher education is determined not by a proposed learning outcome, but by a significant increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), and the ODE institutions in a developing country like India are judged only in terms of their contributions to GER, not in terms of anything else.
- Two other common challenges faced by the distance education institutions have been the significant dropout rate and the downfall in the pass percentage. The reason behind these problems may be the fact that both the private and government sectors are not considering the degrees issued by an ODE

institution valid or at par with those issued by the conventional institutions, although the University Grants Commission has clear notifications regarding the equivalence of the degrees. Moreover, the increasing dropout rate is mostly due to students' support system not reaching the learners on time. Similarly, and total absence of face-to-face interaction, may also reduce the student enrolments to a significant extent. The ODE institutions, including the Open Universities may come up with solutions to such problems.

- Due to a large number of students getting enrolled in the ODE system every year, evaluation of these learners has been a major challenge. Although measures are available to meet the challenges related to evaluation, conducting term-end examination has always been a problem for nearly all ODL institutions. Moreover, the use of large scale unfair means to pass the examination has become a social menace that has maligned the image of an ODE institute offering programmes through the distance mode.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 8: Do you think that the educational institutes must change their educational patterns in the context of the 21st century?

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Q. 9: What are the most common challenges in front of the ODE institutes?

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ACTIVITY 11.1

Identify the problems that a distance learner like you are facing while pursuing education in an open university. Suggest some measures to solve the problems of learners identified by you.

11.5 OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES IN ODE

In the above subsections, we have seen some of the challenges faced by the ODE learners, the ODE teachers as well as the ODE Institutions. However, when there are problems, there are solutions too. Therefore, adequate measures need to be undertaken to overcome all types of challenges. The following may be seen as some of the possible solutions to the challenges mentioned above.

- With the increasing need to introduce ICT in the teaching learning transaction to suit modern day requirements, the learners from different remote and difficult terrains shall require training in the use of the tools. However, similar is the case with the teachers, educators, and the instructors, working at different capacities. They too shall require focussed training on ICT tools in order to make effective use of the technologies involved.
- The ODE providers need to ensure that distance education programmes are developed and implemented after going through a market research on the possible takers of the programmes. Besides, there should be a standard mechanism for course evaluation and program accreditation. New programmes as well as their delivery mechanism need to be considered carefully, before implementing them in a different cultural environment of the 21st century.
- Utmost care needs to be taken while imparting education with the help of technology. It has been observed that focus is given more on introducing new technological facilities (as everyday new educational technologies are emerging) than on the content to be provided. So that the actual teaching contents don't get lost due to over reliance on

technology, emphasis must be given on instructional design rather than on new technology.

- Another solution to some of the problems in ODE is that the educators and faculty members employed in various ODE institutes across the country should be involved in the whole process of open and distance learning. Before joining an ODE institution, they should first try to learn the philosophy of ODE.
- Many of the existing ICT-based tools often face severe limitations in addressing the needs of the learners due to their inability to understand the instructions provided in languages other than mother tongues. When technology-based learning is introduced, one needs to recognise this fact. If mobile-based distance learning can be ensured, technical barriers shall become a non-issue. Mobile based learning can help to resolve many challenges faced by ODE institutions of the present times.
- The open universities and the directorate of distance education currently functioning in India must remember and understand the fact that the course contents of each programme is just one part of the education provided to the learners. Therefore, the ODE providers must ensure all institutional support starting from pre and post counselling facilities, academic counselling, library support to other administrative assistance like on campus placements and so on.
- Another most significant development in maintaining the standard of open and distance education may be the focus on establishing more regional centres by the concerned open university. ODE institutions seeking to offer their educational programmes beyond their location may suffer the lack of the need to address the needs of students in specific areas. Therefore, regional centres, which can act as the mirror of the Headquarters located at a distance, can cater to the local and specific needs of the learners. This may also reduce the problem of remaining isolated in a global learning environment.
- Finally, periodical assessment and accreditation of the ODE institutions by higher external authorities may help in dictating important pathways

to the institutions in a globally competitive educational environment. Commonwealth of Learning, Canada offers such a Review exercise called COL-RIM exercise (Commonwealth of Learning Review and Improvement Model) which may help an ODE institutes to identify the faultiness and then take follow up activities for the betterment of the institution. Similarly, NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) of UGC also conducts review and assessment of the enlisted educational institutions by UGC, including the Open Universities. Such exercises shall surely help in meeting many of the challenges faced by the ODE institutions and also enhancing their quality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 10: In what way can we meet the challenges of ICT use?

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Q. 11: Do you think that periodical review and assessment of ODE institutes necessary?

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11.6 LET US SUM UP

- Historically ODE has been facing various challenges that have also affected the reception of distance learning as inferior to the face-to-face mode.
- Some of the challenges of ODE have been the difficulty in catering to the individual learning needs and styles of the learners, inability to control the pace and progress of the learners during the course of their study and so on.
- However, the biggest challenge has always been the so-called

'distance' resulting in a serious communication gap between the teachers and the learners.

- Various undertakings of research and discussions have established the whole system of ODE as an evolving process. And there is also the scope to mitigate the challenges faced in ODE.
- Although the ODE institutions often claim that by introducing various modes of student-friendly ICT support services they can offer an alternative education system, we need to discuss to what extent it has actually succeeded in providing an alternative mode of education in the context of the 21st century India.



11.7 FURTHER READING

1) Panda, Santosh. (ed). (2003). *Planning and Management in Distance Education*. Kogan Page: London.



11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: They must first understand and identify the challenges, and then devise solvable measures to the challenges. For example, one of the most common problems in ODE is the physical 'absence' of the teacher.

Ans. to Q. No. 2: Yes. As 'face-to-face' contact is not considered a part of ODE, most learners often feel the absence of the 'real' person to talk to, and communicate his/her understanding and confusions.

Ans. to Q. No. 3: The general perception of the society against ODE, the perceived irrelevance of the studies they have undertaken, lack of satisfactory support from the employers, the feeling of isolation being a graduate or post graduate from an ODE institute.

Ans. to Q. No. 4: Communication problems between the teacher and the

learner, between two distance learners, between the institution and the learners etc.

Ans. to Q. No. 5: Yes. Very often it is seen that the existing teachers and educators in ODE are not well-versed with the use of modern technologies of communications.

Ans. to Q. No. 6: The general attitude is that they don't usually like the idea of distance learning. Sometimes, they are reluctant to extend their professional and academic help to the ODE institutions, or they might not want to be associated with the ODE system at all.

Ans. to Q. No. 7: Because, many of the teachers and faculty members in the ODE institutes often face the problem of service tenure. Many of the institutions either do not have permanent teaching staff or have only a few permanent staff. The unacceptable terms and conditions of appointment often fail to attract good teachers into the system.

Ans. to Q. No. 8: Increase in alternative work arrangements with flexitime and work-at-home arrangements on the part of the learners. ODE institutions of advanced countries have been promoting greater individual responsibility and learner autonomy.

Ans. to Q. No. 9: The challenges faced by the distance education institutions have been—the increase in the dropout rate, the downfall in pass percentage, the problem of evaluation of a substantially large number of learners.

Ans. to Q. No. 10: Focussed training on ICT tools is necessary in order to make effective use of the technologies involved. Teaching contents should not get lost due to technology, emphasis must be given on instructional design rather than on new technology. The limitations of internet in addressing the needs of the learners are to be discussed in detail.

Ans. to Q. No. 11: Yes. Periodical assessment and accreditation of the ODE institutions by higher external authorities may help in dictating important pathways to the institutions in a globally competitive educational environment.



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

A. Short Questions (Answer each question in 150 words)

Q. 1: What is meant by the term ODE?

Q. 2: Why is distance education necessary?

Q. 3: What is the relevance of distance education in today's world?

Q. 4: Which are the three parties always involved in Open and Distance Education? Discuss in detail.

Q. 5: Make a list of some the common challenges and problems in an ODE institution.

Q. 6: In what ways, do you feel the problem of isolation or marginalisation on the part of the ODE learners can be solved or minimised?

Q. 7: What is the need of periodical assessment of the ODE institutions? Name some of the organisations which conduct review and assessment of the educational in general.

B. Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q. 1: Discuss the challenges faced by the ODE institutions in general.

Q. 2: Enumerate the problems faced by the learners perusing their education from the open universities in a country like India.

Q. 3: What are the challenges faced by the teachers of the ODE institutions? In what ways, do you feel these challenges can be met? Discuss in detail.

Q. 4: Do you think that the ODE institutions themselves are facing various challenges? Discuss in detail.

Q. 5: What are some of the important measures to be taken while meeting the challenges face by ODE? Discuss.

Q. 6: Do you think that in ODE, there has always been a problem of communication between students and teachers, and between two peers? Discuss.

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