

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE SUCCESSFUL LEARNER: A Case Study of IGNOU

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ABSTRACT

The growth of enrolment in the ODL system has been considerable. However, another parameter of significance in the context of Open and Distance learning is the learner success rate. While enrolment rates have been very encouraging in distance education, the pass-out rates haven't been similar. There is a need to focus on the dynamics involved after a learner enrolls himself in an OU and what drives him to stay focussed and complete his academic pursuit successfully or alternatively what holds or slows his academic progress and eventually makes him drop out. The study highlights that there are both institution-based (that is OU-based) and learner-centric factors that could facilitate learners to successfully complete their studies. There are both controllable and uncontrollable factors that affect the OU learners' success rate. This study attempts to capture the learner-centric factors and OU-related factors that have facilitated the learners to successfully complete their study.

The paper delves into those key aspects or factors which would have facilitated the passed out learners in successfully completing their programmes in the open system. The findings are of direct interest, both from an institution perspective and that of a distance learner. It provides inputs to the Open and distance learning system, towards formulating appropriate strategies that further facilitate learners to successfully pass out. Also the findings serve as indicators/guide rules for any learner in the open system.

Keywords: ODL system, OU learners'; learner-centric, IGNOU.

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Education is primarily aimed at providing solutions to the issues of access and equality in Higher Education by providing a viable channel to all who aspire to attain academic proficiency, irrespective of the limitations otherwise imposed by socio-economic or demographic constraints.

The Open Universities have made very considerable progress in providing access to higher education to its vast population. Today in the Indian context, there is one national Open University, IGNOU which has emerged as the world's largest university. Apart from this, there are 13 State Open Universities functioning in various states in the country. The total enrolment of distance learners in India was one million in 1998, of which 50 percent was with IGNOU (IGNOU 2008). Now the enrolment in IGNOU itself has crossed 2.8 million and is the largest university in the world in terms of student enrolment. The growth of enrolment in the ODL system in the country shows that it has been well accepted. However, another parameter of significance in the context of Open and Distance learning is the learner success rate. The success rate referred to here is the rate at which the learners enrolled are successfully completing their studies and passing out. While enrolment rates have been very encouraging in distance education, the pass-out rates haven't been similar.

Reddy (2002) in his study found that pass percentage of students was very low. Hence, there is a need to focus on the dynamics involved after a learner enrolls himself in an OU and what drives him to stay focussed and complete his academic pursuit successfully or alternatively what holds or slows his academic progress and eventually makes him drop out? Are there any avenues for intervention that an Open University can make to enhance the success rates?

UNDERSTANDING THE SUCCESSFUL LEARNER

Unlike formal education system, the learners with an Open University (OU) are adult learners who engage in academic pursuits along with other personal and professional responsibilities at their home/office/society. Hence, it is challenging for these learners to stay focussed on their learning responsibilities as a distant learner. However, many learners are able to simultaneously pursue and successfully complete their academic programme within the time duration specified by the OU. It would be pertinent to consider that only a low percentage of the enrolled learners successfully complete their academic programmes in an OU system, thus resulting in a large number of drop-outs.

Therefore, it would be of paramount interest and importance to understand the factors that help a learner in successfully completing his academic studies. There are both institution-based (that is OU-based) and learner-centric factors that could facilitate learners to successfully complete their studies. Learner-centric factors can be primarily classified as;

- factors which are related to the learning skills/abilities of the learners and
- (ii) learner's environment related factors such as family background, responsibilities at home, official commitments if employed etc.

Thus, an OU learner is in an environment, which is a combination of these three environments (Figure: 1)

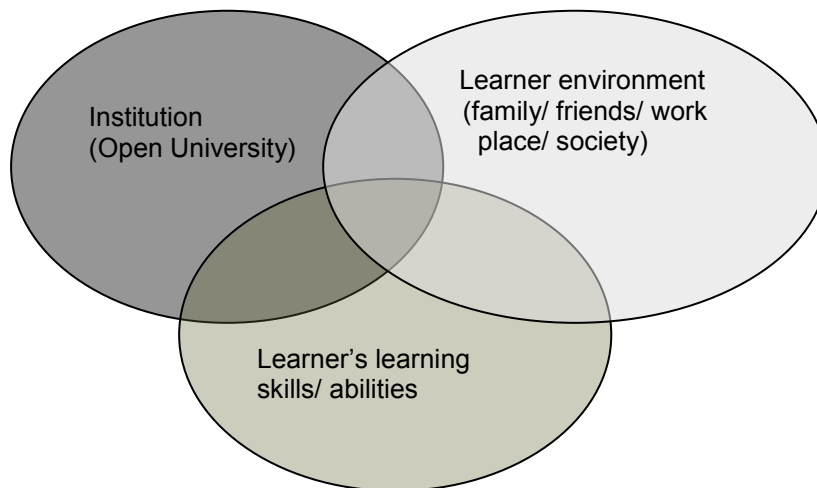


Figure: 1
Schematic representation of an OU distant learner's environment

From the context of facilitating a learner towards actively pursuing and successfully completing his studies, all these three factors can act either as facilitators or as de-facilitators. Ideally all these three aspects work as highly positive or conducive, then the learner is certain to complete his academic studies successfully.

That is, if the OU operates in a learner friendly approach focussing on enhancing learner satisfaction and minimisation of student grievance, if the learners' immediate environment comprising of his family, friends, colleagues provide the required support in terms of sharing his other responsibilities and motivating him and also if the learner possesses adequate learning skills, high academic self-concept, achievement motivation etc., then the learner would be able to successfully pursue and even excel in his studies. High achievement need can help in reducing the drop-out rate of distance learners (Lohumi, 2002).

However, learners in an OU are highly heterogeneous in terms of their age, family background, employment status, self-learning abilities, achievement motivation etc. From the perspective of the Open University, there are both controllable and uncontrollable factors that affect the OU learners' success rate. These are:

- The learner's learning abilities, which is a function of his comprehension skills, educational background, reading-writing abilities etc., on which an OU has low/not much role to intervene with.
- The next aspect is the role of the OU towards facilitating learners to successfully complete their programme and thereby enhance the success rate of the OU. Measures such as providing good quality study material, prompt services such as quick processing of admission application forms, ensuring timely receipt of the study material by its learners, organising counselling and other academic services such as assignment evaluation and conduct of the examinations in a time bound and professional manner and most importantly, providing satisfactory responses/action to queries of the learners and as well quick redressal of the learner grievances, all facilitate the learner to pursue his studies instead of acting as de-motivators or de-facilitators to active study by the learners. Learner support dimensions such as printed study material, academic planner etc. were found effective in facilitating student learning (Sim and Idrus, 2003).
- Another important aspect that could affect greatly facilitate successful completion of the study would be the supportive and encouraging approach of his immediate environment comprising of his spouse/children, other relatives, friends, colleagues, superiors in the office etc.

OU are established with the social objective of providing access and success in the realm of higher education to all who desire. However, in a populous country like India, the challenge to enhance access and success in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) cannot be effectively achieved solely by the OU itself. It calls for synergic efforts by all stakeholders including the society at large. Thus, the family, friends, employers etc. who constitute the immediate environment of a learner, also play a crucial role in either facilitating or de-facilitating the learner towards successfully completing his study. This study attempts to capture those learner-centric factors and OU-related factors that have facilitated the learners to successfully complete their study.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The successful learner in Distance Education in the context of the study was considered as those learners who had pursued their academic programme with an Open University/Distance Learning Institution and successfully passed out and earned their degree/diplomas. Since Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is the largest Open University in the world in terms of student enrolment, it was felt that the issue of success in OUs can be studied by considering the learners of this OU. Further, during the annual convocation functions of this OU, a sizeable number of learners pass out.

Therefore, the study was conducted among IGNOU learners. The study was conducted using a multipurpose questionnaire through which the requisite information was sourced both on the numerical and descriptive scales, the attempt being at getting a holistic understanding of the successful learners.

The sample technique adopted for the selection of the same is Simple Random Sampling.

The Sample

The study was undertaken among the students who had successfully completed their study in the years 2010 and 2011. The sample was randomly selected from among the learners who had successfully completed their degrees/diplomas and were receiving their degree in the Convocation attending the function at Regional level under the auspices of IGNOU Regional Centre Cochin.

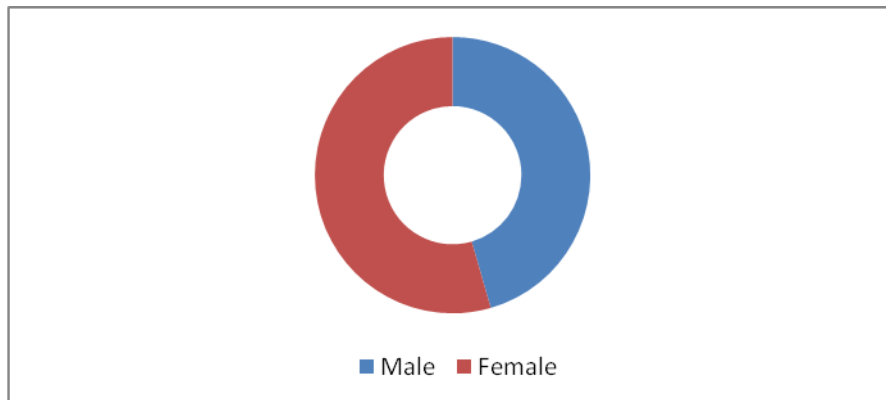
Responses were collected from a random sample of 102 learners. The randomness of the sample ensures that the sample is unbiased.

The male-female distribution of the sample is given in Tabl: 1 and Chart A.

**Table: 1
Male /Female Distribution**

Male	Female
51	61

Chart A

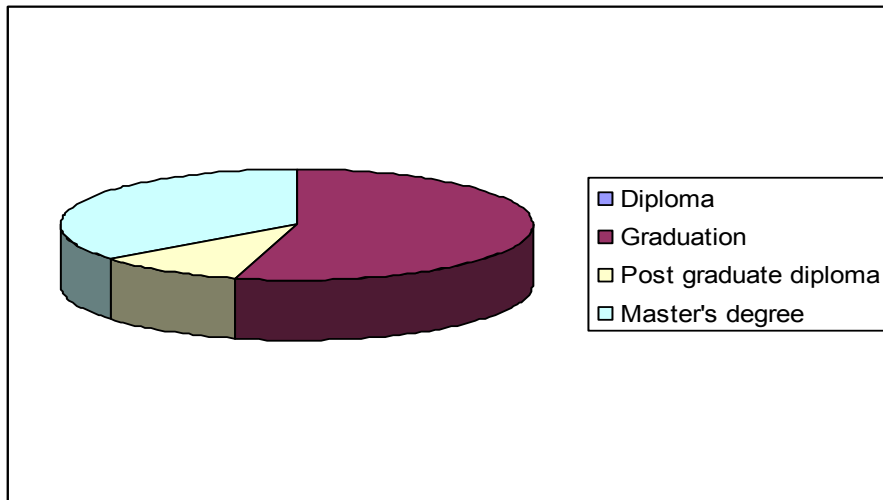


The sample comprised of a fair representation of both male and female. However, there was a higher percentage of female learners than males in the sample. The level of academic programme pursued by the respondents from IGNOU such as post graduation/graduation/post graduate diploma/diploma etc. is given in Table 2 and Chart B.

**Table: 2
Level of academic qualification earned from IGNOU**

Diploma	Graduation	Post – Graduate diploma	Masters degree
--	57	7	38

Chart B



56% of the respondents had successfully completed their bachelors' degree from IGNOU. 37% were masters' degree holders from the Open University (OU). The rest had earned their PG diplomas from IGNOU.

The bachelors and masters degree respectively entail a minimum of two and three years of study with the OU, unlike the PG diploma and diploma programmes which require a lesser duration of study with the OU. Thus, masters and bachelors degree learners have a longer lasting experience with the OU than learners of diploma/PG diploma programmes by virtue of the duration of the respective programmes. Further, these are the main academic degrees that are offered in any University. Hence, the sample comprising of a majority of masters and bachelors degree holders, is appropriate from the context of this study, namely to understand what drives a learner to successfully complete his distance learning programme.

In order to understand the various factors that have facilitated the learners to successfully complete their study, responses were sought from the sample on a number of questions as below:

Table: 3
Describe your overall experience as a learner with OU.

Overall experience with OU	Frequency
Great, it was a very pleasant experience	65
A satisfactory experience	28
Not satisfactory	9

64% of the learners stated that they describe their OU experience as very pleasant. Though the majority learners are positive about their experience, a matter of concern is that 36% did not have such an experience. It would be pertinent to mention here that a learner friendly approach from functionaries at all levels of the OU towards maximising learner satisfaction by prompt service and quick response to their queries and problems, would definitely work towards instigating the learners to actively pursue their studies.

On the reverse, slow/poor response to learners' queries/problems may dissuade the learners especially those who are from rural/lower socio-economic backgrounds/or with low support from family, friends etc.

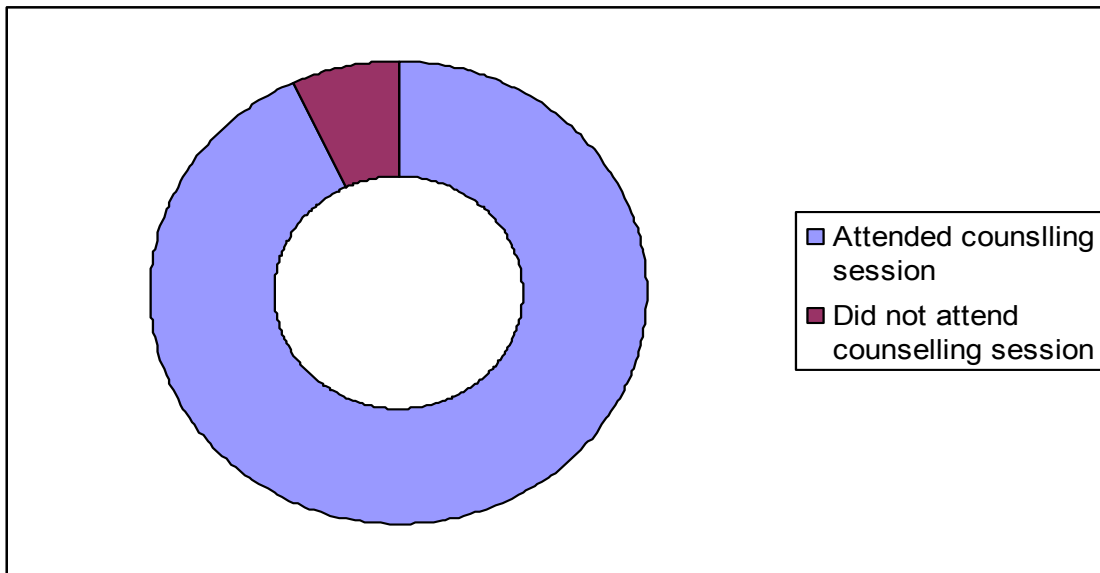
Thus, having a very satisfied learner base in an OU has, if not direct, significant implication on the learner pass out rates.

Table: 4

Whether the successful learners attending the counselling sessions organised by the OU?

Attended counselling sessions	Did not attend counselling sessions
95	7

Chart C



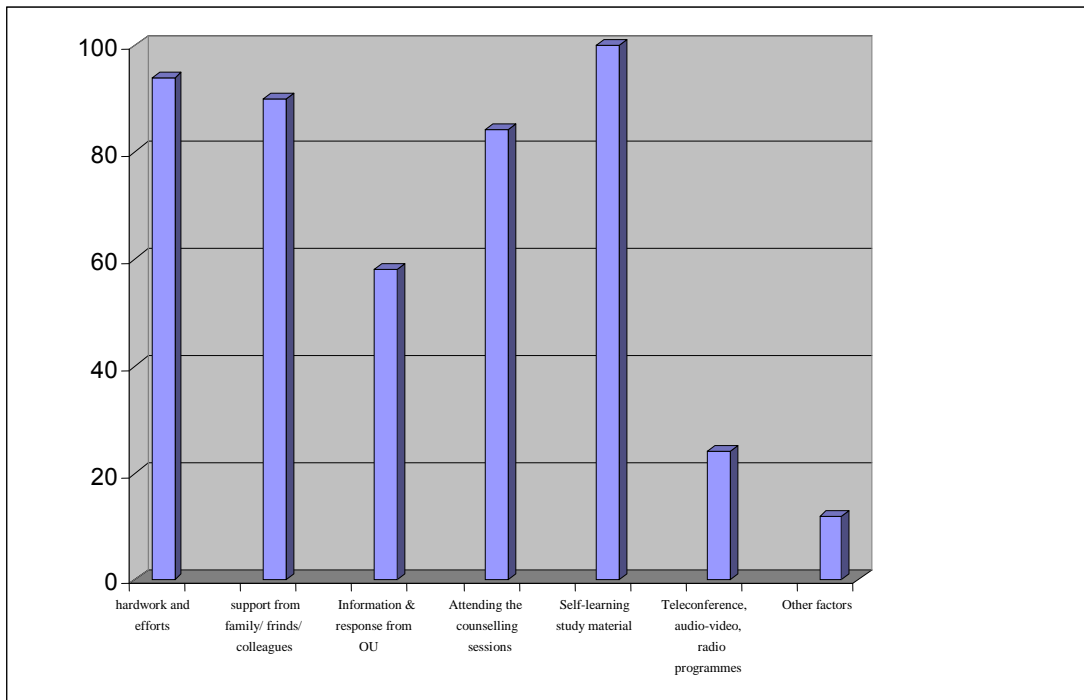
In IGNOU, it is not compulsory for the learners to attend the counselling sessions, and therefore, it is for the learner to decide whether or not to attend the counselling sessions. It is interesting to note that most learners (93%) had attended the counselling session organised by IGNOU at its Study Centres. (Table: 4)

Table: 5

What are the factors that you think helped you in successfully completing your study with IGNOU?

Factors which helped to successfully complete the study	Frequency
Hard work and efforts put in	94
Support received from family/colleagues/friends/peer learners	90
Information and response from OU	58
Attending the counselling sessions	84
Study material provided by the OU greatly facilitated self-learning	100
Attending the multi-media programmes such as teleconferencing Sessions/audio-video programmes/radio programmes etc. helped the study	24
Other factors	12

Chart D



The learners attributed their academic success to a number of factors (Table 5 and Chart D). Almost all learners (98%) mentioned that the study material provided by the OU greatly facilitated self-learning, which reflects their high satisfaction with the study materials. The other obvious reason for their success was the hard work and efforts they had put in, reflected by 92% respondents. Another important aspect which learners (88%) acknowledged was the support they received from their family/friends/colleagues, which helped them to successfully complete their academic programme. However, only 58% learners mentioned that the information and response from the OU as an aspect contributing to their successful completion of the academic study. Only 24% learners stated that attending teleconferencing sessions, audio-video programmes and radio programmes as a one of the factors that helped them to complete their programme.. 12% of the learners also ascribed their success to other reasons such as relevant work experience in the field in which the academic degree was pursued from the OU, earlier degree acquired in the same discipline etc.

Table: 6

Please give your rating of the following aspects in the order of relevance with regard to your successful completion your study with OU

Degree of relevance of factors in successfully completing the study	Mean score on 5 point scale
Hard work and efforts put in	4.2
Support received from family/colleagues/friends/peer learners	4.1
Information and response from the OU	2.9
Attending the counselling sessions	3.2
Study material provided by the OU greatly facilitated self-learning	4.6
Attending multi-media programmes such as teleconferencing sessions/ Audio-video/radio programmes etc.	1.5
Other factors	1.4

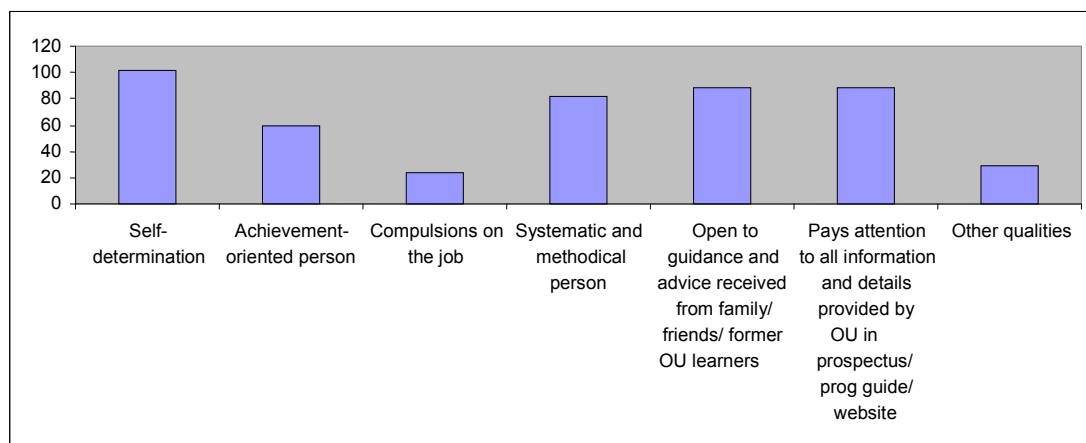
The respondents were asked to rate each aspect on a 5 point scale ranging from most important (score of 5) to least relevant (score of 1). Table 6 shows the mean scores of the ratings. The most relevant factor which the learners stated was the self-learning study material, indicated by a mean relevance of 4.6. This shows that they are satisfied with the quality of the study material and its self-learning features. The next relevant factor was the hard work and efforts (4.2) put by them, which of course is a pre-requisite to successfully complete the study.

The third most relevant factor (4.1) was the support from family/friends/colleagues/friends etc. as it helped them in accomplishing their academic goal, amidst other roles/responsibilities in family/office. The next aspect was attending counselling sessions reflected by a mean relevance of 3.2. The support from the OU in terms of providing the sought information/responding to queries etc. had a relatively lower score of 2.9. This was followed by aspects such as attending the multi-media programmes organised by the OU (which is optional for the learners) and the last aspect, others with a score of 1.4 included relevant work experience (especially in case of learners who pursued nursing and teacher development courses). An aspect of concern from an institutional perspective is that the quality of service in terms of providing timely information/responding to learner queries/problems was not seen to score high.

Table: 7
What specific qualities in you helped to successfully complete your academic pursuit as a learner in an Open University?

Qualities in you that helped to successfully complete your academic pursuit as a learner	Frequency
Self-determination	100
Achievement-oriented person	60
Compulsions on the job	25
Systematic and methodical person	80
Open to guidance and advice received from family/friends/former OU learners	85
Pays attention to all information and details provided by OU in prospectus/programme guide/website etc.	85
Other qualities	30

Chart E



In Open and Distant Learning (ODL), providing satisfactory learner service is of paramount importance to break the isolation of the learner and to facilitate him to successfully complete the study. In the sample, it is evident that since other factors such as family support was there, the learners could successfully complete their study. However, in situations where that kind of support may not be available for many learners, other aspects such as OU support and service becomes more crucial to sustain the learner’s motivation and help him successfully complete the study.

Highly scored qualities stated was self-determination, open to guidance from others, paying attention to communications/information from the OU and being a systematic-methodical person. (Table 7 and Chart E)

Table: 8a

Would you agree that you have acquired certain skills/abilities/qualities by being a distant learner? If yes, list them.

Acquired certain skills/abilities/qualities	Did not acquire

Table: 8b

Please list if you have acquired any skills/qualities/abilities acquired by being a distant learner

Skills/qualities/abilities acquired by being a distant learner	Frequency
Skill to do self-learning/self-comprehension by sourcing reference material from sources such as books/libraries/web	
Able to multi-task/handle multiple roles simultaneously	
Time management skills	
Developed a spirit of life long learning/desire to continuous Self-improvement/development	
Developed/improved my reading habits	
Writing skills became better	

It is interesting to note (Table 8a, 8b) that a good majority of learners (96%) perceived that they had acquired certain skills/qualities by virtue of having been a distant learner. 80% of the learners felt that they acquired the skill to do self-learning which a pre-requisite for a distant learner with an OU.

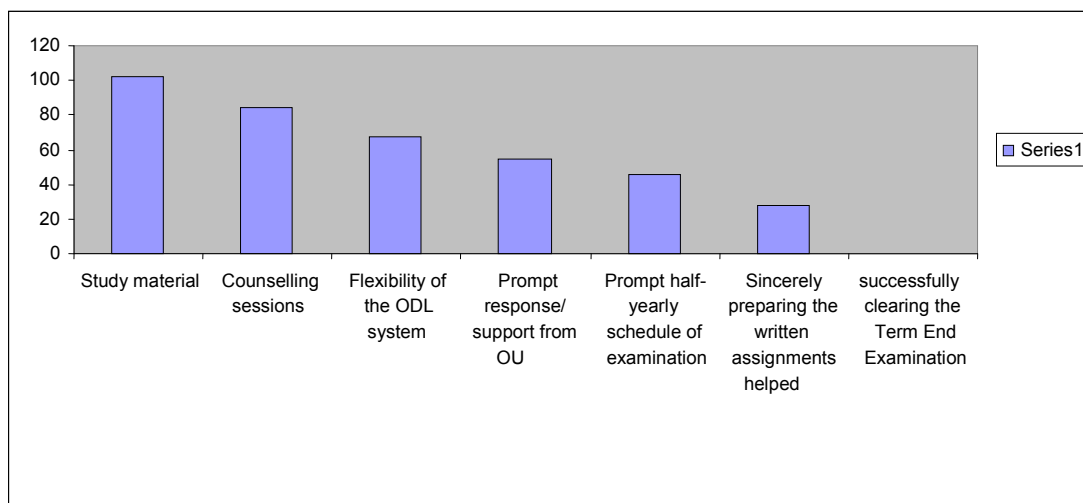
The scheme of study in the OU through the self-instructional study material provided, familiarised the learners with the process of self-learning. Further, the study material and the assignments led them to source other related literature for their studies from other books, web, reports from libraries etc.

Another valuable quality that 60% learners stated was that they have developed/improved their time management skill. An interesting fact is that 50% of the learners stated that the years of study as a distance learner, facilitated development of ability to multi-task/handle multiple roles and simultaneously manage one’s responsibilities as a learner, family member, employee etc. A supportive approach from family/friends/colleagues further facilitate the learner to ably multi-task this roles and also do justice to his learning. 21% distant learners claimed to have developed a spirit of life long learning for continuous self-development/improvement and further desire to pursue relevant academic programmes or skill updation training programmes. The other abilities stated include improvement of reading habits and writing skills.

Table: 9
List five important aspects of the OU
which helped you in successfully completing your study.

Aspects of IGNOU which helped to successfully complete the study	Frequency
Study material	102
Counselling sessions	84
Flexibility of the ODL system	67
Prompt response/support from the OU	55
Prompt half-yearly schedule of examination	46
Sincerely preparing the written assignments helped in successfully clearing the Term End Examination	28

Chart F



In order to understand those features of the OU, which helped the learners to successfully complete their study, the learners were asked to state five most important aspects of the OU which helped them in successfully completing their study.

As evident from Table 9 and Chart F, the most obvious aspect stated by all the learners was the study material. The next important aspect was the counselling sessions which seemed to have helped the learners in their study.

Thirdly, the flexibility of the ODL system such as relaxation in maximum duration, credit system, modular pattern of academic programmes was mentioned also facilitated the adult learners to complete the study amidst their other responsibilities/roles. The next aspect mentioned was the prompt response/support they had received from IGNOU from its various offices at the headquarters, regional and study centres.

The next aspect mentioned was the prompt schedule of OU Term End Examination. IGNOU conducts Term End Examinations on a half-yearly period during every June and December, gave the learners ample opportunities to plan and prepare their studies. 27% of the learners opined that taking sincere and whole hearted efforts to prepare assignments made the task of appearing in the Examination much easier and helped in successfully clearing the examination.

Table: 10
During your experience as a learner, it is likely that there could have been occasions when you were demotivated/dissatisfied/hindered the progress of your study. List those occasions, if any

Reasons/occasions which demotivated/hindered progress of study	Percentage
Job pressure/family responsibilities slowed down my academic progress	78%
Delay in updating assignment grades in the student grade card/wrong entry of grades/delay in declaring Examination result	23%
Delay in getting response/reply from the OU to queries/problems	20%
SC functionaries not possessing up-to-date information/knowledge of various aspects to answer student queries	8%
Study centre for the programme very distant from home	4%
Sometimes counsellors not able to satisfactorily handle doubts	3%

Learners mentioned personal and organisational-based reasons which demotivated/hindered their study (Table 10). Since personal reasons such as family/official responsibilities are uncontrollable as far as an OU is concerned, they are not focussed upon here. From the OU perspective, a matter of concern found is that 23% of learners faced some kind of problems during their course of study with regard to delay/wrong updation of their assignment grades/delay in result declaration. The learners mentioned that they had to pursue the problem with the OU officials to rectify/solve the issue. This definitely implies that the learners have to be determined and focussed to get their grievance resolved, so that they can further progress and successfully complete their study and earn their degrees. However, in case the learners with low achievement motivation/from rural areas/from lower socio-economic backgrounds etc. may get demotivated with such problems/delays and slow down their academic pursuits and even result in dropping out of their study. Another issue that affected the spirit of distance learning, as stated by 20% learners was the delay in getting response/reply to their queries/problems from the OU. Other occasions mentioned by a few learners include lack of upto-date information/knowledge of Study Centre (SC) functionaries to answer student queries, distance from Study centres and unsatisfactory handling of doubts by the counsellors. Though these issues have been pointed out by relatively few learners, they need to be addressed as it may adversely affect learners with lower motivation levels, leading to their drop-out from the system.

Table: 11
As a successful learner, what advice would you give to a new learner which you think will help him to successfully complete his study?

Advice to new learners to successfully complete their study	Percentage
Read Self-instructional materials and comprehend it	95%
Prepare your academic calendar and follow it systematically	91%
Carefully read all communications from the OU and time-to-time seek out information especially from the website.	78%
Make a sincere and concerted effort in preparing and writing your assignments which will to a great extent help in appearing for the examination.	43%
Don't delay your studies, the more you delay- the lesser chance, you will go back and complete it	33%

Table: 11 provides the responses provided by the successful learners which could serve as learning tips for the existing/new learners. Of course, systematic reading and comprehension of the study material was mentioned by 95% learners.

Another important approach stated by 91% respondents was to follow a systematic approach and prepare your academic calendar and follow it. 78% learners mentioned that it is necessary to carefully read all communications from the OU and also seek out information from the website and other sources. Other tips mentioned was preparing assignments sincerely and not delaying studies upto the maximum duration provided by the OU.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

- 36% of the successful learners did not describe their experience with the OU as a very pleasant experience, instead chose to describe it as only satisfactory/not satisfactory. Ideally, every learner of the OU should have a very positive and pleasant experience as it would only work towards motivating them rather than dissuade them from their academic pursuit. This is more important especially for the learners from rural, lower socio-economic backgrounds, low achievement motivation etc. Thus, providing excellent learner services and quick response to their queries/problems are significant from the perspective of enhancing success rate.
- Among the factors to which the learners attribute their academic success to, there are both learner based aspects and OU-based aspects. Apart from the learners' hard work, the other important learner-based factor that facilitated the learners to successfully complete their study was the support received from their immediate environment namely; family/friends/colleagues. Thus, it signals the crucial role of the society at large in enhancing the success (pass out) rates.
- Among the OU-based factors, the support from OU in terms of providing the sought information/responding to queries etc. had a relatively lower score than other factors. Ideally, the OU itself should act as one of the strong facilitators to help its learners accomplish their academic goal. Hence, the study signals a need for more focussed approach in terms of policies and practices, to immediately attend to/solve learner queries/problems as well as set strategies that would motivate them to successfully complete their studies.
- The successful learners stated that their habit/quality to continuously pay attention to all communications/information from the OU, helped them to successfully complete their study. OUs can stress these qualities to the learners during appropriate forums such as induction meetings, website, counselling sessions etc.
- It was interesting to note that the learners perceived acquiring certain skills/qualities by virtue of being a distant learner. The skill to do self-learning, better time management and ability to multi-task were the main value-additions stated by them. hus, apart from academic erudition and knowledge enhancement, OU learning fosters other such valuable life skills and qualities.
- Among the most important features of IGNOU which helped them succeed, self-learning materials was stated as most important and it facilitated systematic self-learning at the learner's pace and convenience. Other aspects stated were the counselling sessions, flexibility of the ODL system and prompt support from the OU. A noteworthy feature of the OU mentioned by the learners was the very prompt schedule of conducting the Term End Examinations twice in a year.
- Some of the concerns/moments of anxiety experienced by the learners include occasions when there was delay in updation of their assignment grades/delay in result declaration/delay in getting response/reply to their queries.

Though the problems were resolved when they approached/communicated their grievance to the OU, such occasions could have demotivated/dissuaded learners with lower levels of focus and determination, and they may not have taken the self-initiative to approach/communicate their grievance to the OU, which over time could lead to an eventual drop-out. Thus, again the thrust on providing very good learner service by an OU, zeroing-in on learner grievance rate.

- OUs have a responsibility of also working towards enhancing their pass out rates apart from enhancing access to higher education. The learning tips/advice that the successful learners shared during this study such as systematic reading and comprehension of the study material, following a systematic approach by preparing one's academic calendar and following it, could help the new learners with their studies. Another habit that a distant learner needs to develop is to carefully read all communications from IGNOU and also seek out information from the website and other sources, which would not only help reduce learner isolation but as well keep him focussed on his academic pursuit. These learnings need to be communicated by the OU through appropriate means among its new learners.

CONCLUSION

The study followed the approach of focussing on the successful learners in the OU system in order to get insights into how they were able to achieve their academic goal despite the various multiple roles that these adult learners of OUs hold. It can be concluded from the findings of the study that maximising learner satisfaction by providing excellent learner services with quick redressal/response to student grievance/problems/queries could clearly work in the long run towards enhancing pass out rates.

A step further, an approach by the OU that reinforces and motivates the learner, in-built within the framework of functioning of the OU would further help accelerate the success rate. Thus, the study provides valuable insights for formulating strategies from the institutional perspective of an Open University.

Secondly, the study also brings to light the very crucial role that a learner's environment (comprising of his family/friends/employer/colleagues) plays in his passing out (or dropping out) from the OU. In line with the social objective of the OU, the society at large needs to take into cognisance, its very significant role in enhancing the success rate. Also the study points to certain indicators/guide rules, which if observed by the learners would help them to successfully complete and achieve their academic goal.

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