ABSTRACT
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1. Introduction:

The policy for the development of higher education has been mainly governed by the various education commissions and latest by National Policy of education. The Commission gave emphasis on five main goals for higher education – i.e.

2. Equal Access i.e. Equity.
3. Quality and Excellence
4. Relevance and
5. Value based Education.

After taking the review of higher education in the post independence period i.e. Six decades after independence the decided goals and objectives of higher education have been not achieved. Therefore in present scenario of 21st century supplementary parallel non formal education system came in to existence. Distance Education is one of the stream among them. The Open Distance Learning System (ODL) has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic component of higher education infrastructure in the country. It provides access to quality education, at present about 23.35% of the total population of learners in Higher Education are taking the advantage of Open Distance Learning System. The system has higher level of cost efficiency, flexibility and innovative application of ICT for the vast multitude of learners left unserved by the formal system. It has the potential to take higher education to more and more people irrespective of different barriers.

There is however large number of learners that have yet to be reached and providing access to them is a challenge before the system. While ensuring equity poses definite challenge for ODL system.

The institutional policies, planning, structure, governance, service, culture, philosophy and ideology that determine and sometimes limit, systemic
responses need to be analyzed in the light of concrete experiences for effective social interventions and national development.

2. Motivation :-

So far the researches were carried on Distance Education were on growth of Distance Education, Programmes and Courses, Distance learners, Instructional process, Course development and Evaluation, Output and Impact of Distance Education and Economics of Distance Education.

Indian national institution on planning and management of education has developed a list of priority research areas in planning and management of distance education, wherein the goals of access, equity and quality were taken into account. Hence there is a need to assess how far distance education has actually made education accessible. On the equity dimension, research on learners background indicate unequal gender ratio, rural urban ratio, employed-unemployed ratio etc. Therefore researcher has taken the Study to identifying the factors governing access to assess, the degree of inequality, causes of inequity and remedial measures.

3. Objectives and Scope :-

1. To explore the causes, how far Distance Education has actually made education accessible.
2. To identify the factors governing access.
3. To identify the causes of inequality.
4. To suggest the remedial measures.

Scope of the present study.

1. The study is limited to the learners in Distance Education in Western Maharashtra.
2. The study is limited to dual mode universities in Western Maharashtra (Mumbai University, SNDT University, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Shivaji University)
3. The present investigation is limited to a sample of 1000 learners who attended PCP’s in various study centres of above mentioned dual mode universities.

4. The present study is limited to a few personal variables like gender, religion, caste, educational qualification, geographical distance, socio-economic background of learners.

5. The present study is limited to know the factors governing access and equity in Distance Education mode.

4. Description of the Research Work :-

In this study of factors governing access and equity in Open Distance Leaning Programmes. With special reference to the Distance Mode Institute (DEIs) of dual mode Universities in Western Maharashtra.

For the present study, Questionnaire was prepared as per the objective, related information in Western Maharashtra was collected. The sample size was 1% i.e. 1000 distance learners from dual mode universities. Simple random sampling technique was chosen.

Questionnaire was given to students who attended personal contact programmes at different study centers. 1020 questionnaires were received. Among them. 53% were from Mumbai University, 22% were from TMV, 20% were from SNDT and 3% were from Shivaji University. After analyzing the data, the researcher noted the following points.

4.1 It was observed that the yearwise enrollment is increasing in successive years, which suggests that student community has been taking the advantage of ODL system. It is the positive sign, which shows the increase in the accessibility.

4.2 Respondent’s areawise percentage show that respondents from Urban area were more than Rural area. This is due to geographical distance and inaccessibility to reach the Regional or Study centers.

4.3 Genderwise distribution of the students show the male percentage was 54% while female was 46%, the difference in percentage though not
very significant can be attributed to male dominated society. The marital status, employment status and academic qualification of female candidates affects, their access to Distance Education program.

4.4 The marital status of the respondents show that 43% were married and 55% were unmarried and widows and divorcee were 1% respectively. Earning respondents can afford to take education through ODL mode. Flexibility of ODL system support them to continue and complete their education.

4.5 Religionwise classification show that the total population percentage of different majority and minority religion was reflected in religionwise respondents percentage.

4.6 The castewise percentage of enrollment from reserved categories has increased significantly after independence. This is so as the government has provided different concessions to reserved categories. The basic objective of the ODL system is to reach the unreached and to the weaker section of the society has been fulfilled to some extent.

4.7 The percentage of respondents from middle class income group was found to be high i.e. 69% According to the feedback received from learners most of them responded that the financial condition was one of the barrier in getting higher education. The respondents are the earning members, therefore spending on their education is not a burden for them.

4.8 83% of the respondents were employed, therefore the ODL mode has been a convenient mode for them to avail higher education, while performing all the domestic, social and financial responsibilities.

4.9 53% respondents having 1 to 2 family members. Due to higher education, respondents decision making capacity has been improved and due to small nuclear family, the family budget allows them to spend on their education.

4.10 All the respondents are from lower middle class category, therefore 83% respondents do not have separate space and chair for their studies. If the proper infrastructural environment is provided to distance learners, then
the quality of their self learning will largely improve.

4.11 39% learners had SSC as their qualification at the entry point and 34% has below SSC as their qualification, hence if the flexibility in eligibility at the entry level given to the deprived students, their dream of getting higher education could be fulfilled.

4.12 66% of the respondents were computer literate, their awareness and use of ICT could be observed. The online operation of different program may increased the access rate and which will break the barrier of distance between the teacher and learners, and will save time and administrative resources of the institutions.

4.13 Distance Education System is student centric, therefore the needs and expectations of the students should be taken in to account, it will increase the enrollment rate. 45% respondents had the expectation of promotion in their job, 33% were keen to change their job with completion of higher education. Promotion and change in job are the expectations of the distance students.

4.14 Distance Education is the best alternative considered by female respondents (20%) to achieve their dream of higher education because respondent found it more convenient to perform domestic responsibility. 39% were the employed respondents, therefore they could afford to continue their higher education, because Distance Education saved their cost and time of education. The nature of Distance Education system i.e. flexibility, learner centric and learner friendly were proved practically.

4.15 The respondents were asked if they would continue their education if there was no facility such as distance education. To this more than 50% respondents were affirmative but specially mentioned regarding the inconvenience they may have to face. 58% were ready to continue their higher education through Distance mode only.

4.16 Status of infrastructural facilities that are available for learners with regard to class-room 63% learner are availing very good class-room facility, 5% have responded it is not good. Regarding seating
arrangement 75% learners responded it is very good, similarly for the furniture facility 65% described it as very good. In distance mode, study centre and the available infrastructure plays important role as it is the link between the learner and the teaching mechanism.

4.17 Student support service is the backbone of Distance Education System. Student were supported by preadmission and post admission counseling and support. 68% learners state that they get very good administrative support.

4.18 If the support services are provided in specific time schedule then only learner could complete the programme successfully. Learners gave positive response towards time schedule followed during counseling (95%) received study material (85%), Solved Queries in time (88%), received Exam time table (85%) and Hall tickets (82%) in time.

4.19 Distance learner depends on the counselors for guidance. Overall 70% respondents are satisfied with counseling sessions. More than 80% respondents have appreciated the regularity in conducting the academic session. 47% stated that quality of counseling is good, while 44% stated it is very good. If the counselors are well oriented regarding the teaching methodology in Distance Education mode and if he is well aware of the psychology of the distance learners the quality of counseling will be very good.

4.20 In distance mode learners totally depends on Self Instructional Material (SIM). Regarding the content of SIM 46% stated that it is not good. 33% percent stated that it is good. If the course writer and course teacher are trained and are same, could produce a good learning material, at the same time the language editor and the content editor are responsible for providing quality material.

4.21 The facilities like Broadcast/Telecast, Computer Aided Package, CD Roms, and Audio Cassettes were almost available at most of the Regional Centers while availability of such facilities at study center level was comparatively less. Very few respondents have computers (2%) and
audio cassettes (9%) at their residence. 2% have audio cassettes facility at their work place.

4.22 55% respondents states that they attended seminars conducted at Regional centre while 45% respondent attended seminars conducted at study centre level. Regarding Email/Internet facility 40% avail it at regional centre 27% at study center but 20% are availing it their residence is indicating the growing influence of ICT and 13% at their work place.

4.23 Regarding the distance the location of Personal Contact Programme from respondents residence and work place, 35% respondents states that it was more than four kilometers away, from their residence and work place as well, while for 39% and 22% states that it is within one kilometer away from residence and work place respectively. The distance and time required for reaching PCP location effects on the attendance of PCP.

4.24 28% respondents found convenient to attend PCP’s on Saturday/Sunday 31% respondents were very happy with counselling session to be held only for 6 days in a week. 41% respondents have another option rather than counseling on Saturday/Sunday.

4.25 39% respondents attended the PCP’s regularly, 34% not attending PCP’s regularly, 1/4th i.e. 27% were not sure about their regularity. Regarding the timing of PCP 27% were satisfied, for 14% timing was not at all suitable, for 13% timing was suitable to some extent. Most of the learner i.e. 94% do not get facility of residential contact program.

5. **Conclusion :-**

1. Access i.e. enrollment for general programmes was increasing steadily, the reasons for this steady growth are :
   - Flexibility regarding age, time, space and low cost.
   - Flexibility of entry and exit point.
1. Most of learners were employed. Formal system could not offer this flexibility and convenience. There socio-economic environment motivated them to enroll in open distance learning.

2. Enrollment percentage from urban area was more than rural. Since independence steps have been taken by the Government to protect the interests of the inhabitants of educationally backward areas. Though the efforts have reduced the disparities but it was not satisfactory.

3. The basic objective of distance education system was to reach the unreached i.e. the weaker sections of the society. The marital status of women, the employment status of women and the academic qualification affect their access in Distance mode programme.

4. Domestic responsibilities play very important role in making decisions to continue the higher education through distance mode.

5. It was observed that of the total population of each religion in India, has vast differences. The total population of each religion is reflected in the students response.

6. In distance education system the fee structure is considered to be quite reasonable and the criteria for admission in General and Professional programmes are more flexible, the enrollment of learners from the SC, ST, and OBC are found increasing. The difference of percentage between the reserved and open categories is insignificant.

7. Financial /Economic independence is one of the deciding factor for accessibility to higher education. Financial independence reflects through the social life too.

8. Flexibility in eligibility criteria could have resulted into increasing accessibility.

9. The aspirations and needs of the learners should be taken into account. Need based programmes definitely directly reflected in the percentage of accessibility of the programme.

10. DEIs provide learning support services to the distance learner with the help of machine, people and material.
Decentralization and dedicated staff of all the support services help in effective implementation of Open Distance Learning system.

11. Quality of the academic counseling plays an important role in the learning process through distance mode. Interaction and two-way communication are considered central in the distance education process. Distance student benefits from interaction with his tutors and other representatives of the supporting organization.

12. Self-Instructional Material (SIM)

Distance Education is a form of indirect instruction. It is imparted by technical media such as correspondence, printed material, learning aids, radio, television and computers. SIM has a sound pedagogic base and has to pass through rigorous procedure of design and development. If the teachers themselves participate in SIM preparation then it will be to the point and will be more useful for the learners.

13. There is a Head Quarter of each DEI and Open Universities. Regional centers are to liaise between the University on the one side and the students, study centers, the public, the local educational institutions etc. on the other. The Regional centres are established to maintain and monitor the services offered through the study centers.

14. Personal Contact Programme (PCP)

Academic counseling is carried out in PCPs and in face-to-face meetings also. The PCPs motivate the learner to learn, learner gets the feeling of being a part of the group develops the we feeling, then the learning process becomes easy. Frequency in PCPs will increase the communication between the tutor and the learner. The learner will get more support, and the fear about completion of program will be less end.
- **Factors with no extrinsic control**

  1. A comfortable space and proper infrastructure for study.
  2. Expectation of promotion in the job, keenness to change their job with completion of higher education will to upgrade knowledge and educational qualifications affect positively in grabbing available opportunity.
  3. The percentage of married students can increase if they are given concession in academic internal submission. Availability of extra time for preparations on submission could be a reason for refraining.
  4. Females considered ODL as the best alternative to achieve their aim of higher education, because it is more convenient to perform the domestic responsibility as well.
  5. Affordability in pursuing of further education is possible with ODL system.