CONCLUSION

The concept of online student support services is gaining ground in the distance education sector in India. With students as the core attribute and primary focus, these online student support services are being increasingly implemented in various Indian Universities (whether Government, Deemed or Private). In view of the literature survey, the researcher firmly believed that the delivery mechanism of student-centric educational services played a pivotal role in the student delight movement in terms of enhanced student satisfaction. In addition, the service providers’ (or employees’) positive frame of mind and respect for their clients would certainly delight the students.

The main objective of the present research work was to assess the level of perceived quality of distance education services (both online and offline) offered by the selected Universities of India. The viewpoints of the Participants/Students on the traditional mechanism of services delivery, along with the expectation and perception level pertaining to the online student support services (offered by the selected Universities of North India) were thoroughly studied. This study demonstrated the usefulness of the GAP Analysis as an appropriate measure of service quality. This model not only highlights areas for specific action, but it also addresses perceived service shortcomings. The study of expectation and perception level of Participants/Students using online student support services facilities offered by the selected Universities of India revealed, inter-alia, that:

- Both the overall un-weighted (0.69) and weighted (9.31) SEVQUAL scores were in the positive zone, meaning thereby that the Participants/Students’ perceptions were more than their expectations regarding distance education services (online and offline) offered by the selected Universities of India. Participants/Students perceived that the distance education services provided to them were of good quality.

- The respondents accorded maximum weightage to Security (16.80), closely followed by Convenience (16.70) and Easy to use (16.24) dimensions of distance education services. Reliability (15.19) ranked fourth, closely followed by Responsiveness (14.46), Competence (11.60). In fact, Product Portfolio (9.36)
was ranked the lowest in distance education services (online and offline) quality dimensions. This simply meant that the Participants/Students were more concerned with security, convenience and easy to use distance education services as compared to other dimensions of distance education services in terms of quality. The Participants/Students were ready to compromise on Reliability, Responsiveness of the employees, Competence and Product Portfolio offered by the selected Universities of India.

Overall, dimension wise un-weighted and weighted gap scores in all the dimensions of distance education services were discovered to have a positive gap, implying that expectations of Participants/Students regarding distance education services dimensions were met by the selected Universities of India. Participants/Students were consistently more satisfied with convenience dimension [both in un-weighted (0.85) and weighted (13.71) gap scores], which was ranked higher than all other service dimensions of distance education services.

- There seemed to be a significant correlation, positive as well as negative, existing between most of the dimensions of distance education services (online and offline) offered by the selected Universities of India.

- The Participants/Students rated that the quality of distance education services provided by the Indira Gandhi National Open University [both un-weighted (0.46) and weighted (6.17) GAP scores] was much above their expectations and higher than the other selected Universities of North India. The Indira Gandhi National Open University was also accorded the best Un-weighted and Weighted gap score in all the seven quality dimensions of distance education services offered.

It is pertinent to note that all the selected Universities of North India were providing distance education services (online and offline) at or above par than expected by their respective Participants/Students. However, the perception level of Indira Gandhi National Open University Participants/Students was significantly higher than the Participants/Students of the remaining selected Universities of India.
Although all the selected Universities of North India have been providing distance education services at or above par than expected by their students, quality improvement is a never ending process. Hence, the governing bodies of these Universities should train their personnel professionally and upgrade information communication technologies to improve overall students’ experiences and satisfaction. The best way for the management is to monitor the improvement of the physical facilities for distance education services, training of the personnel and providing precise information on all the functions pertaining to distance education services (online and offline) offered by the selected Universities of North India.

The results of the study indicated that the GAP scale could make a valuable contribution by enhancing the understanding of the perceived quality of distance education services in the higher education sector of India. The measurement scale also serves to identify symptoms and the underlying problems inhibiting the effective provision of quality online student support services in the distance education sector of India.

A vital aspect of the present research was to analyze the impact of online student support services in terms of student satisfaction of selected Universities of India. While comparing the level of the overall service quality and satisfaction before and after using online student support services provided by the selected Universities of India, it was revealed, inter-alia, that:

- In the case of overall service quality after experiencing online student support services, the overall mean value of all the selected Universities of India had exceptionally increased, i.e., from 3.44 to 5.24. This revealed that the Participants/Students were more satisfied than before.

- The individual service quality means value of all the selected Universities of North India had improved after experiencing the online student support services. It was also clearly depicted that the Participants/Students of Indira Gandhi National Open University [by replacing Maharshi Dayanand University (5.13)] were having a high mean score (5.46) after experiencing the online student support services. It revealed that Participants/Students of Indira Gandhi
National Open University were more satisfied (than prior to utilizing these services) regarding the overall service quality.

- In the case of overall satisfaction after experiencing online student support services, the overall mean value of all the selected Universities of India regarding overall satisfaction increased admirably i.e. from 3.41 to 4.86. This showed that the Participants/Students were more satisfied now than ever before.

- The individual service satisfactions mean value of all the selected Universities of North India had enhanced after utilizing the online student support services. It was also revealed that the Participants/Students of Guru Jhambeshwar University [by replacing Punjab Technical University (4.94)] were having a high mean score (5.00) after utilizing online student support services, which showed that the Participants/Students of Guru Jhambeshwar University were overall more satisfied now.

Apart from the above facts, the significance value of both Paired Samples t-TEST [overall service quality (0.000) and overall satisfaction (0.000)] (Exhibit No. 16.0 and 17.0) strongly confirmed that there was a significant positive influence of online student support services offered by the selected Universities in terms of the student satisfaction level.

Correlation between student satisfaction and student retention was an important focus area of the study. It was observed that a significant correlation existed between both the variables before using online student support services. While the level of overall satisfaction of Participants/Students had increased after using online student support services provided by the selected companies, no significant correlation existed between both the variables. This depicted that there was no significant linear correlation between student satisfaction and student retention.

In the context of higher education institutions and Universities of India, it could be concluded that the student satisfaction may not always lead to student retention, and service quality had a greater influence on the student satisfaction as compared to student retention. The top management of higher education institutions and Universities of India
must, therefore, focus more on delivering quality services to their students/participants.

A vital aspect of the present research was to examine the factors that motivate the employees to work towards student-centric support services. The foremost factors like Incentives/Rewards/Recognition, Authority/Employee Empowerment, Work Assessment Reports, Service Vision/Student Oriented Universities, Supportive Student Behaviour, Constant Monitoring, Latest Technological Equipment Support, etc. had been included in this study. The results firmly indicated, inter-alia, that:

- On the overall basis, employees strongly admitted that Incentive/Reward/Recognition (mean 4.10) was the most inspiring factor and Clarity of Job Profile/Functions (mean 8.87) was the least inspiring factor for employees to work towards better student satisfaction.

- The results of inter-comparison of the responses of the employees of the selected Universities of India regarding motivational factors varied from the overall results.

- A significant relationship existed between the motivational variables and the selected Universities of India.

Hence, the officials of the selected Universities of India should take immediate steps to consider these factors for motivating the employees to enhance the student satisfaction level.

A noteworthy aspect of the present research was to analyze the satisfaction challenges for the student support executives and management. Key retention challenges like Insufficient or Inappropriate or Bad Information, Student Ego, Quality vs. Quantity Problem, Demanding Students, Annoyed Student/Poor Student Attitude, etc., were incorporated in this regard. The results firmly indicated the following:

- Overall, insufficient/inappropriate/bad Information was assigned the first rank (mean 3.11), which means that appropriate information regarding students is vital
for student care executives involved in the student retention process, while cooperation related factors were considered least important (mean 8.11) by the respective employees.

- The individual results of the selected Universities of India regarding retention challenges were at a divergence from the overall results.

- A significant relationship existed between the factors pertaining to the student retention process and the selected Universities of India, except the odd working schedule variable (ANOVA Sig. = 0.56).

Hence, the governing bodies of the selected Universities of India should take instant steps to address all these factors considered as key retention challenges.

The battle for student satisfaction and student retention has never been more intense. Deregulation, diversification and globalization have stimulated a dramatic rise in competition - and these unforgiving marketplace realities have forced higher educational institutions to switch from a programme-centric approach to a student-centric approach. In today’s competitive business environment, student retention (by increasing the level of student satisfaction) is the core focus of almost all the selected Universities of North India. Therefore, higher educational institutions of India are now focusing more on student service standards. Such standards are now also being incorporated in the long term planning/vision of higher educational institutions. Similarly, the attitude of the top management regarding ‘student satisfaction’ is an essential pre-requisite for online student support services projects. Moreover, each and every service provider should be trained for ‘student delight’ so that a right culture could be built up in the higher education sector of India. A proper reward system is also required as a motivational factor to improve student care services in the Indian Universities.

Quality services call for the right quality of inputs. In this regard, selection of the mode of delivery, online student support services technologies and vendors of online student support services technologies becomes an important task. Online student support services depend on "systems technologies" to support continuous interactions, and fast feedback.
In addition to supporting the student mapping and fulfillment processes, the information captured and managed within online student support services applications can play a vital role in planning and delivering enhanced student service through the integration of online student support services with Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP). The integration of Student Relationship Management (SRM) and other back-end applications has more to do with the culture and processes rather than the software and data flow. This integration is really a challenging task. Technology alone cannot do this. The higher education institutions also need to understand how they are going to fill these gaps. It is a long and arduous journey. Any University or higher education institution committed to online student support services must continuously invest in its relationship with its students since this is the only competitive advantage that lies with the institution.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Isaac Newton’s Third Law of Motion states that ‘for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction’, which suggests that for all the opportunities there are an equal number of challenges to distance education services. It is evident that online student support services, Student Relationship Management (SRM) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) are gearing towards creating a greater student focus and value. But very often, higher education institutions fail to do the obvious. Institutions need to rethink from the students’ point of view and align their distance education services projects with the needs of the students. Keeping in view the online student support services quality, student satisfaction, retention, and online student support services projects failures, Universities should take into consideration the following recommendations for further improvements to meet the challenges of the millennium.

√ There should be greater synergy amongst the branches and departments, failing which effective online student support services cannot take place and the process efficiency will also drop. Universities need to prioritize student centricity, which will lead to a positive impact on the institutional performance. Otherwise, this will show a negative impact in terms of high student churn, low student satisfaction, falling employee morale, decreasing market share and increasing costs due to the fragmented business approach.

√ More reliable information about the students is required in order to target the messages more effectively. This will certainly result in the increase in student enrolment and reduction in general and administrative costs. The students can be approached more effectively with accurate information in hand.

√ A student-centric institution must have an online student support services package from the core technology platform, which should also be optimized for Student Life Cycle Care (SLCC). Online student support services will fulfill its potential of maximizing the profit and value only when the basic or core parameters (like student-centric technology, data quality, people and process) are integrated and leveraged fully.
An integrated student-centric ‘technology backbone’ ensures that the total requirement of the students is consistent with the entire institution and provides the right information at the right time, to the right person and optimizes the student-institution relationship. The ‘technology backbone’ should also be extended throughout the enterprise to include value-added networks.

Quality data management is essential. The data collated from the students, (both past and real time data), should be comprehensive and leveraged for more purposeful applications and for meeting the needs of students. Critical information should also provide a momentum to the online student support services process. Finally, the relationship between the students and the environment has to be optimized and aligned, based on student interaction, CRM metrics and key performance indicators derived from the University performance objectives.

It is rather an absolute necessity to align the institutional objectives, student needs and the student interaction should drive the distance educational services (Online and Offline) implementation process. The student-centric process should have the integration of technology with quality data, in order to acquire institutional gains that create a win-win environment. It should also provide the information (quality data) to the employees to build an enhanced and effective relationship. Further, an effective technological platform should be created to achieve higher process efficiencies. Actionable insight, process efficiencies and performance effectiveness will automatically lead to profits along with a competitive edge.

The question related to management strategies still remains as to ‘what are the norms for the student-centric metrics that should be introduced for achieving better institutional performance initiatives?’ Higher educational institutions/Universities need to pick up the ‘key performance indicators’ that are quantifiable and measurable today as well as over a period of time. There is a distinct need to monitor them continually with respect to the present targets and take corrective actions wherever deviations are noticed. Even the best distance educational services will fail to yield the desired results without a proper plan of action, process and integrated student-centric technology foundation to maximize
For any higher education institution/University, it is essential to identify students with respect to their net worth and retaining them. Students demand personalized services across all channels, and organizations must align their resources appropriately to cater to their needs. A successful organization should have a deep insight into the departmental initiatives as well as departmental jurisdictions, which should be kept flexible.

A smart higher education institution/University will understand that the only way to offer a profitable, differentiated services and product mix is through a better understanding of students and their requirements. By gaining insight into both students and target market segments individually, these Universities can boost up their sales, achieve the corporate objectives and also optimize business performance.

Higher Educational Institutions must switch over from traditional processes and optimize the online student support services investment around the student life cycle. Student-centric online student support services optimize the student experience across service interaction. With effective online and offline student support services, student relationship can be suitably managed to maximize the revenue and lifespan while keeping operational costs low. Online support service must deliver a high level of student satisfaction even at a low cost, by improving dealer productivity and effectiveness.

Though there are various kinds of software that offer student relationship management features, but online student support services transcend beyond software implementation. In fact, it is the business strategy that often involves using a broad spectrum of software, along with implementing policies that promote the collation of student information, and utilizing this information (all across the institution) to maximize student service and enhance student satisfaction.
While providing quality distance education services (online and offline) is an intra-organization strategy, best results can be attained by rolling it out on a phased basis, rather than across the whole company at once. By testing and proving the strategy and business case before rolling it out gradually to further channels, divisions, student groups and product sets, Universities can monitor what's working and what's not in a relatively low-risk environment and make improvements accordingly.

Though these modest recommendations emanating from the present research work do mark the end of this particular thesis, they also initiate the unfolding of a novel chapter - ushering in a new era of distance education services and student satisfaction in the Indian Universities.