



PLANNING PERSONALIZED LEARNER ALERT SERVICES FOR OPEN DISTANCE LEARNERS: A STUDY ON THE STUDENTS OF DR B R AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY, INDIA

V. Chandrasekhara Rao , Dr B R Ambedkar Open University, India

Summary

The article focuses on the learner support services provided to the distance learners of Dr B R Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad (India) with special reference to non-academic communication support. Assesses the present mode of communication sent to the learners of the University and argues that it is not effective as there is large scale dropout. A survey was conducted in two urban study centres covering postgraduate and undergraduate students. Analysis of the data suggests there is no variation with regard to level of academic program, gender, age group, medium, etc in accessing information from the university. Almost all students of the University are using mobile telephones. Recommends personalized learner alert services through instant messaging to learner mobile telephones and e-mails as the learner prefer such services.

INTRODUCTION

The existence any open university rests with the learner enrolment. The learners should be provided with timely and adequate information support in order to continue and progress the studies. A large majority of the learners seeking higher education through distance mode constitute disadvantaged communities in the developing countries like India as they are geographically isolated, socio-culturally deprived or in-service and could not spare enough of their prime time. The open universities and distance education institutions are providing a number of facilities and services as a part of academic and non-academic support, however, a large majority of them are unable to use them due to varied reasons. Proper communication of such support is essential in order to motivate the learners and ensure their progress.

The article is an empirical study which analyses the present pattern of communication and information support to the distance learners of Dr B R Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad (India) and proposes a new direction to the student support services with individual attention to each learner for effective, efficient and engaged (e³) learning.

ABOUT DrBRAOU

Dr B R Ambedkar Open University (formerly known as Andhra Pradesh Open University) was established in 1982 as per the State Legislature of Andhra Pradesh, India. It is the first Open University in India. Its motto is "Education for All". The major objectives of the University include: "to provide educational opportunities to those who could not take advantage of institutions of higher learning; to realize equality of educational opportunities for higher education for a large segment of the population including those in employment, women including housewives and adults, who wish upgrade their education or acquire knowledge and studies in various fields through distance education; etc." To fulfill these objectives the University has been offering various programs of study starting from certificate level to research degrees leading to M.Phil and Ph.D. In the 27 years of its existence the University has provided higher education opportunity to over 2.0 million aspirants. The three-year undergraduate program is very popular and it occupies three-fourth of enrollment annually. In the academic year 2008-09 alone the University has admitted 1,76,769 students for various programmes of study.

STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEM AT DrBRAOU

The student support services comprise a plethora activities and services provided to the learner community. Dirr (1999) roughly defined the term "Student Support Services", which describes, " a variety of non-academic interactions that the student has with a college or university. It includes pre-enrollment services (recruiting, promotion, orientation), admissions and registration, academic advising, financial planning and management, library and bookstore services, counseling and career counseling, social support services, program planning and degree and transcript audit. In addition, technical assistance is an important service for distance learners". Many of these services are inherently part of any open university student support services.

The Student Services Branch (SSB) is responsible for providing support services to the learners of the University. The Director of the Branch is associated various cadres of officials and administrative staff render support to the learner community who are admitted to various programs of study. Through its decentralized functional units of 23 Regional Coordination Centres (RCCs) and 208 Study Centres (SCs) located in different districts the University administers its academic and non-academic support. A team of 6200 academic counsellors provide face-to-face instructional support.

A strong system of learner communication is very much essential to solve the problems of isolated learners spread across the state of 275.068 square kilometers, stretching over 300 kms to north, 800 kms each to south and east and 200 kms to west of the State of Andhra Pradesh. Communicating to a large community of learners spread across the State is an arduous task to the University.

COMMUNICATION / INFORMATION SUPPORT

Communication is not simply a method of sending a message from the organization/University to a learner or group of learners, but it is of vital importance to connect the learner community and motivate them to progress in their learning. As student services branch alone cannot cater to wide range of support various other branches also join it to provide information support.

Table-1: Information Support to Undergraduate Learners at DrBRAOU

Stage

Information support needed

Authority responsible

Tools used

Pre-enrolment

Information about various programs of study

Public Relations Office;
 Student Services Branch; RCCs and SCs
 Brochures; Newspapers; University website
Post-enrolment
 Counselling/Contact schedules;
 Student Services Branch
 Letters; Opvarsity News; RCCs & SCs Notice board
 Academic content
 clarification
 Teaching Faculty;
 Academic Counsellors
 Counselling and contact classes
 AV support;
 Broadcast/Telecast schedules
 Audio-Visual Production and Research Centre
 Opvarsity News; RCCs & SCs Notice board
 Financial support/Scholarship
 Students Services Branch; SC/ST Cell
 Brochures
 Examination Schedules
 Examination Branch
 Brochures; Opvarsity News;
 RCCs & SCs;
 Newspapers; University website
After Graduation
 Convocation
 Examination Branch
 Newspapers; Post; Telephone and Telegrams; Website

Online Learner Information System (OLIS) is an application which is used to provide information to the students and to process student services of the University. Access to the LIS is through University's website (<http://www.braou.ac.in>). Any student can use his seven-digit Enrolment Number (excluding Study Centre code prefixed) and directly view his/her basic details. The details provided are: Student's name, Father's name, Address, Medium of Instruction opted, Modern Indian Languages (MIL) opted, Optional subjects, fee paid, etc. The advantages of LIS include centralization of data, elimination of manual work in correction/ updation, read in lead time, minimizing the discrepancies, etc.

Dr. B.R. AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY
 డా. బి.ఆర్. అంబేద్కర్ సార్వత్రిక విశ్వవిద్యాలయం

PERSONAL DETAILS

Personal Details				Address Details			
Admission No	0000004	HNO		H.NO	9-27/3		
Name	HIMALATHA	Street		Street	TEACHERSCOLON		
Father Name	V S PRASAD RAO	Town		Town	DASNAPUR		
Social Status	BC-A	District		District	504111		
Study Center	001	State		State	ADILABADDLABAD DT.		
		Pincode					

ACADEMIC DETAILS

Medium	Telugu	MIL	Telugu
Second Year Optionals		Third Year Optionals	
optional 1	08	optional 1	08
optional 2	09	optional 2	09
optional 3	10	optional 3	10

Fee DETAILS

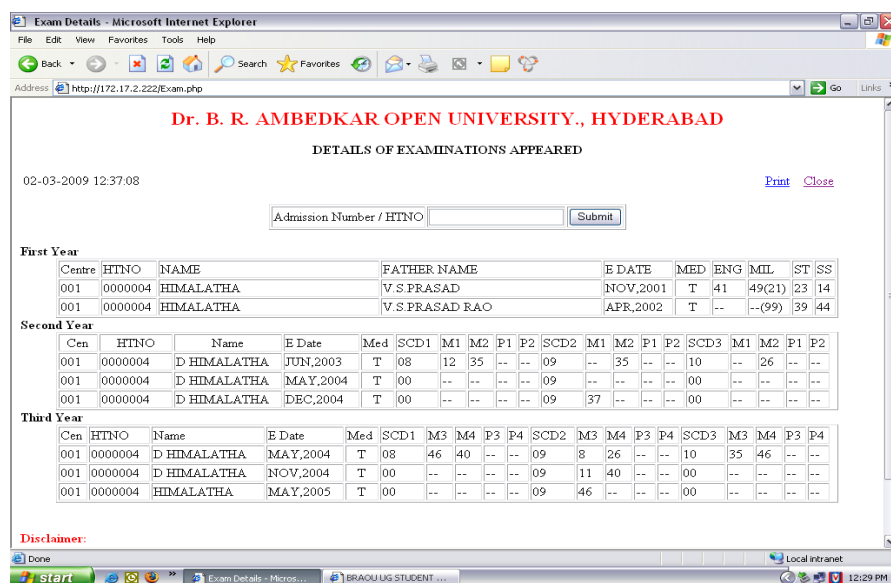
Fee1 Details							
Reciet1	12345	DTP	2007-05-04	AMT1	200	Reciet2	2222
						DTP2	2006-07-20
						AMT2	200

Fee2 Details							
Reciet1	12345	DTP	2007-05-05	AMT1	2007-05-05	Reciet2	5555
						DTP2	2007-05-05
						AMT2	2007-

Fee3 Details							
Reciet1	12345	DTP	0000-00-00	AMT1	1333	Reciet2	null
						DTP2	null
						AMT2	null

[BACK](#) [CLOSE](#)

Similarly any student can view his/her examination details from the University website.



STUDY DESIGN

The University has earned high reputation and credibility in producing high quality material over the last two and half decades of service to its distance learning community. However, Prasad and Venkaiah (2005) remarks “reports of the research studies reveal that the students complain about the non-receipt of course material and communication”. As per the statistics, the University admitted over 16,17,000 students from 1983-84 to 2005-06. Out of which only 1,11,000 students who have successfully completed their students and taken their degrees till the recent convocation held in 2009. The successful completion rate is only 6.8 percent. This leads to the question why there is a large scale drop out among the students admitted. The present provision for communication and information support may be not effective and thus contributing to large scale drop out rate.

Communicating to a large community of learners geographically spread is an arduous task and it is humanly impossible to check individually who has not received such communication. A large number of students are unable to receive official communication due to their mobility on occupational or socio-cultural grounds and not affecting such change of address, erroneous entry/details, long holidays, etc. As a result a large number of students turn up to face-to-face contact classes, examinations or to pay the fee. The communication sent by the University is a generalised communication through post and complemented by newspapers, and electronic media which may not attract the attention of individual learners.

A study has been designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How the learners access information from the University?
2. How frequently learners visit their study centres and for what purpose?
3. For what purpose learners visit the University headquarters?
4. Whether the students check the University website?
5. What is the frequency of use of electronic media, internet/email and mobile phones by the learners?
6. Are the learners interested in receiving personalized information alerts on their mobile phones or as email alerts?
7. What is the awareness levels of distance learners on new tools like web 2.0?

A Survey was undertaken in Hyderabad city (urban setting) and two study centres, one postgraduate (PG) and one undergraduate (UG) centres located at R.G. Degree College (Chaderghat Area) and Govt. Junior College (Kacheguda Area) respectively. By Quota sampling method 50 students from each study centre, who are in their second or final year of study and visiting the study centre were administered a questionnaire assuming that they are familiar with the Open University system and services. The data collected from the responses of the questionnaire has been and presented with simple frequencies.

STUDY FINDINGS

The major characteristics of the respondents under the Study are:

1. The male and female respondents are in the proportion of 45:55.
2. The majority of the respondents are predominantly pursuing their studies in the medium of Telugu (58%), followed by English (42%).
3. The employed and unemployed are more or less in equal proportions (51:49)
4. The majority of the respondents are youngsters in the age group of 21-40 years (83%) and a few are 41-60 age group (17%).
5. The distance the respondents travel from their residence to the study centre is up to 10 kms by 68% and more than that by 32%.

(1) Mode and Nature of Communication received from the University

The respondents were asked to answer whether they received any information from the University in the past three months. More than half of the respondents replied affirmatively (66%) and remaining (34%) said negatively. The respondents who received communication were further asked to specify the mode of communication received from the University and they replied that it is through letters.

The most of the respondents who did not receive communication through letters from the University accessed information either from the notice board of study centre (15%) or newspaper items (9%). A few are getting information also from the house journal, *Opvarsity News* (5%), University website (4%) or television broadcasts (1%).

The information received from either from the University through letters or accessed from other sources is mainly on contact classes (82%), tuition fee (11%) or examination fee (7%) payment.

(2) Frequency and Purpose of Visits to the Study Centres

To the question how frequently they visit their study centres the majority of the respondents replied that very frequently by 26%, frequently by 38%, occasionally by 23%, and rarely by 13%. The students of UG, Telugu medium, male gender, employed and those aged 21-40 years visit very frequently compared to their counterparts. It was found that 86 percent of the respondents visit the study centres for attending the contact classes, followed by 8% for information and 6 percent for payment of tuition fee or examination fee.

(3) Purpose of Visits to University Headquarters

The majority of respondents also visit the University headquarters often for various purposes. Out of 59 respondents who visit the headquarters, majority of them are visiting for the purpose of paying tuition fee or examination fee payment (25 or 42%, followed by them are for practical classes (16 or 27.1%), information/guidance (4 or 6.8%) and change/correction of details (6 or 10.2%).

(4) Use of Electronic Media (Radio & Television), Internet/Email and Mobile Phones

The responses of the respondents on the use of electronic media (radio and television), Internet/email and mobile phones are analysed and the major points are presented in Table-3:

- Only 30 percent of the respondents are using radio. The students of UG, Telugu medium, employed, female and those in the age group of 21-40 years use radio slightly over the other categories of respondents.
- 1. Television is used by most of the respondents (86%). There is not much marginal variation among the respondents with regard to their program of study, gender, medium, and employment. However, the age group of 21-40 years and those who travel 10kms to the study centre are high users of television than their counterparts.
- The use of Internet and email is very low among the respondents. Among the respondents the youngsters in the age group of (21-40 years) are major users of Internet.
- Mobile telephone is very common among the distance learners. All most of respondents (95%) use mobile phones.

(5) Use of University website

Majority of respondents (61 percent) have not seen the University website, while only 39 respondents have seen it. Out of these 39 respondents, 25 (64 percent) have seen it for examination dates/ results and six (15.4 percent) have seen it for learner details, while others watched it for university faculty (3 or 7.7%), contact telephone numbers (2 or 5.1%), and university activities or other purposes (2 or 10.2%), etc.

(6) Awareness on Web 2.0 Tools

Awareness and use of web 2.0 tools is very low among the respondents. Out of 11 respondents who said they are aware of them, only five have replied they are aware and using them for the purposes of social networking, while the other six respondents have said they heard about them, but not using them. All the respondents unanimously marked that they are interested to attend if any training sessions are provided by the University in this regard.

(7) Alert Services through Mobile Phones

Almost all respondents (79 percent) prefer to receive Mobile SMS Alerts for information from the University, while 9 percent and 2 percent are interested in email alerts and voice messages to their telephones. Only 10 percent are silent about their preferences.

PLANNING PERSONALISED LEARNER ALERT SERVICES

The University is presently contemplating to scale up the use of Information and Communication Technology applications. According to Dirr, Peter J. (1999), "Student support services is not something that can easily be changed incrementally... slow change of student support services is that not all are easily accommodated by today's technologies. It is a complicated process to offer some of those services well over the World Wide Web, for instance..."

The Internet is fast developing as a medium of communication. Some learners are also interest in email alerts. The University may explore this medium and adopt group email services. De Moraes and Rodrigues Paz (2003), "the Internet is regarded a simply a tool to facilitate fast and efficient communication, a vehicle in which to arrive at institutional goals based on enhanced student support and monitoring. In the future, it is communication between and amongst students, monitors, and the University. Such easy-to-use features as the ability to file and archive messages, respond to queries asynchronously offline, program

address books and mailing lists, etc., makes email a preferred choice for many students. When used correctly, email also motivates, inspires, clarifies, and greatly reduces the sense of isolation often felt by distance education students and their monitors”.

Andhra Pradesh Inter-University Consortium (APIUC) was set up in 2008 at DrBRAOU as collaborative project of 11 state universities which are offering distance education programs of study in the state. A university portal has been designed to mutually contribute and share the digital resource material and information for all the distance learners of various open distance education institutions in the state following the model of national one-stop portal “Sakshat”. (<http://www.sakshat.ac.in>). Digital Literacy modules are being prepared to educate the distance learners.

One very interesting observation from the present study is that almost all learners are using mobile telephones and they are interested receive mobile information alerts. This is a personalized alert service through Instance Messaging technologies, which the University is trying. Gaskell and Mills (2004) argues that telephones have a major role to play in student support and are indeed the best medium to choose for student contact. “Evidence from the research indicate that

- The key area for developing student support is in countries with a high level of access to mobile phones and low access to computers
- Text messaging can be very important in some contexts but has limitations in terms of extended student support
- Rapid advances in technology will enhance the use of telephones for support in future...”

Instant Messaging (IM) technologies allow effective and effective communication to the distance learners. The mobile instant messaging and chat create possibility of real time text-based communication to learners over the Internet. Some systems even allow offline messages. A dedicated corporate IM server will be used, which will be configured with contact lists of learners, integrated authentication and security and privacy protocols. As the University is currently studying adoption of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solutions an Enterprise Instant Messaging (EIM) found to be a possible better option. The SMS and email alerts are the other modes to provide effective communication to its learner community.

CONCLUSION

Communication plays a vital role in distance education. The success of distance education rests with proper and timely communication to its learners. A learner of distance education is like a customer in business. Any business which cares its customers survives and leads progressive growth. As the distance education institutions are supported by public funding all the resources should aim to the welfare of the individual learner and make all the possible efforts for progress and completion of their academic endeavour. Sewart, D. (1993) observed, “We might posit a system of education which admitted 100,000 students per year and offered them no further support of any sort until the examination at the end of the year. Such a system would have most of its expenditure in direct student costs centred on the set of course materials provided for the vast student intake. The cost of its student support service would be zero. Students would receive no support from the institution and would merely be required to study on their own and submit for an examination rarely complete the course”.

REFERENCES

Dirr, Peter J. (1999).”Putting principles into practice: Promoting effective support services for students in distance learning programs”.

<http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/projects/studentservices/survey%20report.pdf> (accessed on: 03/03/2009)

Gaskell, Anne and Mills, Roger (2004): "Supporting students by telephone: A technology for the future of student support?" *European Journal of Distance and E-Learning* (EURODL). http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2004/Gaskell_Mills.htm (accessed on 03/03/2009)

De Moraes, Marialice and Rodrigues Paz, Carolina (2003): "Supporting distance students using the Internet: A Brazilian experience". *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 4(1),

Prasad, V.S. and V. Venkaiah (2005). *India's First Open University: Experience of Two Decades*. Hyderabad: GRADE, DrBRAOU. p.110

Rekkedal, Torstein and Qvist-Eriksen, Svein (2004). "Support services in E-Learning – an evaluation study of Students' needs and satisfaction". *European Journal of Distance and E-Learning* (EURODL). http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2004/Rekkedal_Qvist-Eriksen.htm (accessed on 03/03/2009)

Sewart, D. (1993). "Student support systems in distance education". *Open Learning*, 8(3), 3-12.

