

**Effectiveness of the Social Work Programme offered through Open and Distance learning-  
A study of Learners Perception (With special reference to Uttarakhand Open University,  
Uttarakhand, India)**

\*Dr. Deepak Paliwal, Associate Professor  
(Sociology), School of Social Sciences,  
Indira Gandhi National Open University

\*\*Dr. Neerja Singh, Assistant Professor (Social Work),  
Uttarakhand Open University, Uttarakhand, India

**Purpose:** In the wake of the new COVID-19 outbreak and resultant lockdowns, education across India has been severely influenced with a huge number of students left out education. During this period, ODL has proved to be very efficient and useful in providing quality education throughout the country and different parts of the globe when people got confined in their homes. It has helped in reaching to the learners with the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and through different means and mode so that learners' time is not spoiled.. This is also reflected in the enrollment ratio which is clearly seen to receive a hike in open and distance learning institution in India during these two years. The main purpose of this paper is to assess learners' perception towards the effectiveness of the social work programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University, India in the past 10 years and in CoVID times.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:**

Explorative research methodology has been used in the present study. The sample size consists of 200 learners enrolled in the MSW (Master of Social Work) programme of the Uttarakhand Open University, India. The data analysis has been done on the basis of data extracted from the primary and secondary sources.

**Findings:** It is clearly shown from the current study that learners were satisfied with all the parameters of the social work programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University. Satisfaction level was high with respect to quality study material, assignments, as well as field work guide book which provide complete information on methodology and description of the field work. Therefore, ODL mode of education has proved to be quite useful and successful in meeting the objectives of social works programme where learners got quality education and opportunities to the learners to attain a professional degree along with their job or other responsibilities.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Open and Distance learning, Perception, Effectiveness

**Introduction:**

Distance Education a term synonymously used with Open and Distance Learning (ODL), has gained significance over the last few decades in India particularly during the late Twentieth century when first Open University named Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, was established in 1983 following the establishment of another National University i.e., Indira Gandhi National Open University, in 1985. As far as popularity and acceptability of ODL is concerned, it is increasing continuously. That is why there are fifteen (15) Government Open Universities are already in existence in India. Students of all age groups, even younger generation are getting enrolled in various programmes offered in ODL mode. Programmes are not only of traditional kinds but also new emerging areas are also getting place in ODL. It seems that ODL has immense possibilities and is a powerful means of educating people. The importance of ODL was well realized worldwide during COVID times when the lockdown situations compelled the regular mode based institutions to adopt the various tools, techniques and procedures of ODL system. According to NEP 2020, the GER of our country is still quite low when compared with the developed nations like USA, UK, Germany and target of 50 % GER has been set by 2035. If we want to meet the 50% GER by the year 2035, then in Indian conditions it is possible only if ODL system is used judiciously without compromising the quality of the programme. Continuing, open and distance education was late to pick up speed in India largely due to the initial hesitation to accept these modes of education at par with the traditional classroom-based programmes (K.M. Bahrul Islam, 2021). Both the systems of education in India i.e., regular mode and ODL mode, have been declared at par, yet a lot needs to be done to bring them practically at par particularly on quality grounds although UGC-DEB has framed regulations specific to ODL from time to time in order to enhance the quality of education through ODL.

### **About the Uttarakhand Open University**

Keeping in mind the tuff geographical terrain and needs of the society, Uttarakhand Open University was established by an Act of Uttarakhand Legislative Assembly in 2005 (Act No. 23 of 2005) in tune with the philosophy of ODL system and with the aim of disseminating knowledge and skills through distance learning, using the flexible and innovative methods of education to ensure flexible and ‘independent learning’. The University uses innovative and novel educational programmes, using various modes of Information communication technology and counselling sessions to make Open and distance learning more useful and effective. The main vision and mission of the University is to cater to the educational needs of the target groups to create skilled and knowledge based human resource for speedy upliftment and development of the State. The University aims to impart quality education by maintaining high academic standards. For this purpose, it has radically reoriented itself in view of the rapid changes in the sphere of professional and technical education and has developed a number of new and innovative self-employment/ employment-oriented courses of study. Uttarakhand Open University is especially focusing on the educational needs of women, the tribals and other

marginalized sections. It has extended its reach to unreached places and has made its presence felt even in the remotest corners of the state.

### **Increase/ decrease in the enrolment of learners in the Institution year wise over the last five years**

Table -01 represents the increase/ decrease in the enrolment of learners in the Institution year-wise over the last five years. This Table shows that in 2016-17 total enrollment was 41656. In the same way in 2017-18 total enrollment was 68142, in 2018-19 -55998, in 2019-20- 69554, and in the year 2020-21 total enrollment was 74344. This table also represents the maximum number of enrollment in the year 2020-21.

The data clearly reveals the increased in the enrollment ratio, this shows that the faith and believe towards Open and Distance learning is increasing among the learners. It is clear from the data that Open and Distance learning follow the practices in accordance with the notion of 'reaching the unreached', 'education at the door-step of the learners', 'life-long learning' and education for those who could not pursue their education through the formal system of education (Table-01). The flexibility and quality of Self-Instructional Learning Material (SILM), skill enhancement courses increase the viability of the Open and Distance learning. ODL emerged as a tool for those who are living in far flung areas but want to continue their education and also for the girl's child who are now able to manage their household chores along with their education. Thus, it is clear that ODL fulfilling the needs of various sections of the societies by providing education at their door step and reaching to the unreached. **Source;** SSR Uttarakhand Open University, 2021

### **Number of learners enrolled from rural areas year-wise over the last five years**

In order of data obtained from Table - 2 year wise numbers of learners enrolled from rural areas over the last five years represent that in 2016-17 total of 28273 learners enrolled from rural areas likewise in 2017-18, 37108, in 2018-19, 42813,2019-20,50757 and the year total learners enrolled in 2020-21 are 55974.

The Uttarakhand Open University is continuously working in the direction to build an inclusive society through inclusive education and it is working hard to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by reaching to the unreached areas of Uttarakhand and by offering various skill development programmes along with the traditional programmes in the remotest areas of hilly terrains of the State of Uttarakhand. The data in table-02 clearly depicts that enrollment numbers from rural areas is increasing day by day, this shows that ODL working in accordance to their motto of reaching to the unreached and providing quality education through various means and modes of education to enhance the overall development of the rural population.

**Source;** SSR Uttarakhand Open University,2021

The details of the students enrolled based on gender have been presented in Table-03, according to which the total enrollment of males in the year 2016-17 was 20786, in the same sequence the enrollment of females was 20870 and its total number was 41656. Similarly, in the year 2017-18, the number of females was 35301 in proportion to the number of males 32841 and its total number was 68142. In the year 2018-19, total male 25897 and 30101 females enrolled. In the same sequence, in the year 2019-20 total male 31043 and 38508 female and transgender students, and in 20 20-21 total male 33522 and 40817 female and transgender The number of students were 5 who have taken admitted to different courses the university. It is also clear from the above data that a total of 309,694 students have taken admitted in the last five years and a total of 8 transgender students have also taken admitted in 2019-20 and 2020-21. This is a step forward towards equality and the right to education where education is accessible to a person irrespective of his caste and gender. It's a good sign.

The data reveals a very interesting finding that the enrollment ratio of the female is increasing year wise in comparison to male counterpart (Table-03). This shows that's ODL has provided a platform to the female learners to continue their education who left education in between due to various house hold responsibilities and to perform the household chores. This is the first step towards gender equality which is a positive step in the overall development of the female learners. The female learners are also coming forward to take admission in the Master of Social Work programme(MSW) in comparison to male counter(Table-04,Graph-01) . The main objectives of the MSW programme is to provide in hand training to learners in different areas of domain like Medical, HR management, Labour Laws and NGO management so that windows of job opportunities available to them after completing the progarmme. The study reveals that ODL has provided the platform to the learners at their door step to enrolled in different professional programme because of which female are coming forward to fulfilled their dreams by completing the professional course (Table-04,Graph-01). ODL emerged as platform which provides them the wings to fly. Transgender also coming forward to be part of this mission although the enrollment number is very less however ODL has open the ways to everyone to continue their education irrespective of caste, gender and religion. **Source;** SSR Uttarakhand Open University,2021

Enrollment numbers in the Master of Social Work program in the last five years have been displayed in Table-04, according to which in the session 2016-17, 217 men and 381 women took admission, whose total is 598, in the same order 2017-18 193 men and 340 women took admission in M.S.W., and in 2018-19 290 men and 467 women, in 2019-20 men 264 and 478 women and 2020-21 total men 551 and 835 women took admission in Masters in Social Work It is also clear from the above data that the number of women is more than the ratio of men in each

session. The above table also shows that in the previous year 2501 females have taken admitted as compared to 1515 males.

SSR Uttarakhand Open University, 2021

### **Objectives of study**

Covid-19 pandemic has forced the learning process to be conducted online. Hence, the rapidly changing environment encourages the governments, universities, lecturers, and students to adapt the new learning system. Research has consistently shown that one of the most important factors contributing to a student's success is the quality of teaching he or she receives.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To assess the learners' view towards the effectiveness of the Master of Social Work programme
- To evaluate the role of ODL in providing quality education

### **Review of Literature**

Bishnu Mohan Das (2019) in his study on the effectiveness of the social work programme found that majority of the learners' were unaware of the ODL system and their presence in the counseling session was also less. He also concludes that learner's enrolled in MSW programme face lot of problem with regards to field work supervision and other components of field work were also neglected. Volery & Lord (2000) found that the commencement of online classes led to various difficulties for both teaching and learning communities, though, the internet is a major technological advancement reshaping society and universities worldwide. The online learning environment varies profoundly from the traditional classroom situation when it comes to learner's motivation, satisfaction, and interaction, as stated in a study in which 385 college students of various disciplines in Nepal were asked about their opinions regarding online classes implemented during COVID-19 lockdown (Aditya and Jha, 2020).

Studies have revealed that ODL provides opportunities to those who have no access to school / colleges but have zeal to be part of education system keeping in mind their future stake (Paliwal 2019). Paliwal concludes that in the hilly regions where most of the children left or dropped out their studies, especially the girls' students, due to various reasons: it may be the long distance of the school from home or poor economic condition of the family, ODL plays an important role by providing education at their doorsteps. ODL emerged as a tool in solving all the problems and reaching the unreached through its learner-friendly approach. Distance education also provides new and creative options for educators, such as providing training in rural areas, the potential to include other educators' expertise when they work hundreds of miles away, adding a needed course to a current curriculum without hiring a new faculty member, or even co-teaching with a colleague at another university (Woodford et al., 2001).

Saumya and Singh (2020) in their study found that majority of the learners enrolled in MSW programme preferred to read printed self-learning materials however in rural areas though with increasing access to Internet, learners are gradually opting for online materials while filling up the admission form. Majority of students found the quality and standard of study materials to be very good. Though maximum respondents gave positive feedback about the student support services and their learning experiences, some of the learners' faced problems like no support from the staff, problem regarding selection of fieldwork supervisor, late delivery of study materials, lack of staff members at study center, far distance of study Centre from residence. Recent technological advances have created significantly more opportunities for social work programmes to deliver education to persons who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to complete a full schedule of campus-based courses (Coe & Elliot, 1999).

Gagne and Shepherd (2001) in their study found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional classroom settings. The study shows that students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods. Thus, the study confirms that distance education is not less in any points in compare to traditional method of teaching. Distance education, as the name itself indicates, is providing education to the unreached and marginalized sections of the society. The education is offered using various means and modes of social medial like print, audio and video components with flexibility for the learners to learn at their own pace. It provides education to all segment of society irrespective of caste, age, gender and religion. It aims to train people in various disciplines and to develop professional skills in different jobs using a multimedia approach to teaching a distance learner. It is gaining prominence because it reaches a broader student audience, addresses student needs, saves money, and uses principles of modern learning pedagogy (Zarghami and Hausafus, 2002).

Ojo, Olugbenga & Olakulehin, Felix Kayode(2006) in their study, 'Attitudes and Perceptions of Students to Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria' assesses the attitudes and perceptions of distance teaching and learning by students enrolled in the NOUN(National Open University of Nigeria) and of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) compared to their experiences at conventional universities. One hundred and twenty (n = 120) randomly selected NOUN and NTI students of NOUN were the subjects of the study. The study reveals that that students generally have a positive perception and attitude towards ODL, compared to traditional forms of higher education.

It is clear from the above studies/review of literature that as far as effectiveness of the programmes offered by the Uttarakhand Open University is concern, no study of this sort has been done by any social scientist. Therefore, the need of the hour is to make an extensive and intensive study of the perception of the learners and the effectiveness of the programme as offered by Uttarakhand Open University. This study critically assesses the perception of the learners towards the effectiveness of the social work programme offered by the Uttarakhand

Open University, India. Data was collected on participant demographics, attitudes about social work, and levels of knowledge about the profession and reasons for enrolling in the programme.

### **Design/Methodology/Approach:**

Explorative research methodology has been used in the present study. The sample size consists of 200 learners enrolled in the MSW programme offered by the Uttarakhand Open University, India. The data analysis has been done on the basis of data extracted from the primary and secondary sources. The research paper is based on the feedback received from MSW learners of the Department of Social Work, School of Social Sciences at Uttarakhand Open University, India. For data collection, a Google form was prepared and sent to all the learners of MSW through email, WhatsApp, Telegram, and other messaging and social media platforms. The Google form consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions relating to their profiles, assignments, reasons for enrolling in social work programme, quality of the self instructional learning material and challenges faced by them while pursuing the MSW programme.. Responses were received from 200 MSW learners. All the responses were collected in an excel sheet and visualized as charts wherever applicable. The findings are exclusively based on the experiences of learners while pursuing the MSW programme through ODL mode from Uttarakhand Open University, India.

### **Data interpretation:**

The responses were analyzed as two groups, firstly the male learners and secondly the female learners. These two groups are further divided into four groups according to their age class i.e. 18-25, 26-30, 31-40 and 41-50. The results of all the questions were studied and various opinions and problems raised by the respondents were compiled, compared, and interpreted. The interpretation includes the underlining cause of the obtained result, the effects it brings up, and the future predictions and recommendations. The results were compared with existing literature and well discussed.

### **RESULT:**

The observations and discussions start from learners' perception view. These results were then expressed in the form of a discussion focusing on the major aspects of i) preliminary information ii) level of assignments iv) quality of study material and assessment methods and vi) future aspects.

The course modules, structure of the MSW programme offered by the Open Universities differ, depending upon local situations. For instance, the Philippines Open University implements the programme to improve the skills of qualified BSW students who are practitioners or educators. It is a part of continuing education for professional development. United Kingdom Open

University's objective is to provide opportunities for individuals working in social service institutions to get a professional degree without leaving their jobs (Thomas and Varghese, 2011).

One of the drawbacks of regular mode of education is its accessibility particularly to those who have comparatively disadvantaged position either due to their economic background or due to geographically remote and difficult location. Social work programme offered through ODL mode has greater reach and access due to its flexibility the potential to impart quality training. Besides, it offers the learners the flexibility of learning at one's own pace, and working and studying at the same time.

#### **A. Reason for enrolling in MSW Programme:**

Out of 200 learners 55 % are female learners and 45 % are male learners. Out of which 33 % learners are of 26-30 years, 40% are of 31-40 years and 10% are of 41-50 years (Fig 2). This indicated that ODL courses cover all age groups. 46 female learners and 39 male learners enrolled in MSW programme for higher studies. 64 learners (46 female learners and 39 male) enrolled for better job opportunities and 26 learners enrolled for carer growth (Table 5, Fig. 3).

#### **Satisfaction with study material:**

Self-Learning Material is an important medium of imparting knowledge to the learners. Since there is no face-to-face interaction the quality and the content provided in the study material should help in providing a classroom like atmosphere. The material should be self-instructional in approach. The term self-instruction means a guide book which guide learners step by step and direct how to proceed with Self Instructional material and do the self assessment exercises available on the SLM. Maximum learners satisfy with the study material provided by the university. 90 % learners are fully satisfy with the SLM while only 3% are not satisfied (Fig. 4).This shows that University is working on the development of the quality of the status material.

#### **B. Learners' perception towards Assignments:**

An assignment is a piece of (academic) work or task. It gives an open door to learners to learn, practice and exhibit that they have accomplished the learning objectives. There are a lot of benefits to gain from using an assignment as an assessment method. Assignments can for instance be used to test higher cognitive abilities and the application of specific skills or knowledge. It can mirror the future professional practice. It can be used to assess the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes (competences). Assignments are given to the learners for their evaluation in ODL system. It is also a part of examination. Learners perception about the assignment shows that 48% learner feels, it's hard for them and 44% indicated assignments are moderate and only 7 % says it's easy for them (Table 6)



### **C. Satisfaction with the Assessment Process:**

Many sorts of assessment exist; subsequently assessment techniques should be modified by the thing is being assessed and the reason for the assessment. It is futile to try and determine how effective our program is? This is why process of assessment should be done prior to any other type of evaluation (Hawe et al. 1990). Our study indicated that 67% learners are Completely satisfied with the assignment and evaluation process, 26% learners are little bit satisfied with the assignment and evaluation process and only 5 % are not satisfied with the evaluation process ( Table 7.).

3.4 % Learners found that the language could be in easier format then the provided one, 11% indicated that there is a need for an improvement, 2.3% are not satisfied with the study material of MSW and 81% learners found that the provided study material of MSW is very good, it fulfills their requirement and good enough for their learning. Comparison between male and female learners indicated that female learners are more satisfied then the male learners (Fig 6 & 7, Table 8).

The study clearly shows that learners were satisfied with the all the parameters of the social work programme as offered by the Uttarakhand Open University starting from the assignment to the quality of study material as well with guide book which provides complete description of the field work. Thus, it is clear that ODL provides quality education and opportunities to the learners to carry on their professional degree in pace with their job.

### **Discussion:**

Open and distance learning playing an important role in providing quality education to the learners and to all the sections of the society who are unable to be part of the formal system of education through its friendly and learners' centric approach. ODL provides all sort of facilities to their learners similarly as in the case of conventional method of teaching and learning through different modes of teaching and learning. OLD system of education is one of the effective ways of educating aspiring learners from every corner of world if the quality issues are adequately addressed. With the evolution of new ICT tools and techniques and their integration in ODL has solved the quality issues in ODL to a great extent. In COVID times, majority of the institutions including regular mode based institutions adopted ICT tools and delivered lectures or conducted counselling remotely with a great amount of success. If we could maintain the pace of learning during COVID times, it was possible only because of ODL tools and ICT together. Further, adoption and promotion of ODL becomes more important in Indian scenario because of high population load and also because of cultural, economic and geographic diversity which is limiting for maintaining GER at par with world average. Target of 50% GER by 2035 (NEP 2020) is only possible judicious use of ODL in Indian conditions especially in programmes like MSW.

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