ROLE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM IN DISSEMINATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MARGINALIZED SECTION OF SOCIETY; CASE OF UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

DR KALPANA PATNI LAKHERA
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY HALDWANI (NAINITAL)

BRIJESH KUMAR BANKOTI
RESEARCH SCHOLAR, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY HALDWANI (NAINITAL)

DR RAKESH CHANDRA RAYAL
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION
UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY HALDWANI (NAINITAL)

ABSTRACT

Open and Distance learning system integrates online educational resources using technology of education and technology in education through both online and physical classroom modes. This study is an attempt to find out prospects of distance education in present time and explore challenges in distance education. Education is an effective means for bridging social category gaps and exclusion. Higher education supports to break out the disadvantage of exclusion in marginalized section of society. Higher education inculcates positive attitude towards inclusion through accepting importance of existence of every individual in society. It is crucial for sustainable development to include marginalized groups in higher education. Dissemination of awareness and updating existing system are very crucial for success of any system. 'Uttarakhand Open University' is working in these priorities for better achievements. University a key contributor in providing higher education to underserved communities in Uttarakhand and India. The significant increase in enrollment from '2776' learners in 2005 to about '85000' learners in 2023, demonstrates the widespread acceptance of Open and Distance learning system among learners of 21st century.
Keywords: Prospects, challenges, exclusion, inclusion, sustainable

INTRODUCTION-

Uttarakhand Open University, a state university, was founded in 2005 under Act No. 23 of the Uttarakhand Government. It provides higher education through open and Distance mode .This is single mode University which is continuously striving to reach different segments of society. 'Uttarakhand Open University' is advancing steadily with its fresh, innovative, and beneficial educational programs tailored to the needs of society. Information and Communication Technology is utilized in various university functions such as admission, examinations, teaching-learning processes, assignments and communication with students. The study aims to investigate the opportunities and obstacles in Open and Distance Education in Uttarakhand. The university's goal is to provide high-quality higher education to all students, especially those from historically marginalized, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, regardless of

where they live. The University mainly caters to the development of "women, tribals and marginalized section of society".

'Uttarakhand Open University' offers higher education to a wide range of people, especially those in remote and rural areas, working individuals, housewives, and adults seeking to enhance their knowledge in different fields. The university aims to facilitate learning in a fast-evolving society and consistently provide chances for knowledge enhancement. 'Sustainable Development Goal-4 (SDG4)' aims to guarantee fair and comprehensive quality education and encourage continuous learning opportunities for everyone by the year '2030'. Currently, with technical progress and widespread internet access through mass media, Open and Distance education can serve as a powerful tool for providing higher education to underserved communities. The 'Open and Distance Learning' system focuses on prioritizing accessibility, equity, quality, and relevance for learners. Education is shifting from focusing on content to emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, transdisciplinary skills, innovation, adaptability, and the ability to absorb new information in evolving domains. Both content and pedagogy need to be modified to achieve relevant and effective outcome-based learning.

The University primarily, 'focuses on the advancement of women, tribals, and underprivileged groups' who have been excluded from the mainstream society. Over the course of 17 years, the University has significantly evolved and successfully expanded its outreach to previously inaccessible populations. University plays significant role in the state's development through providing high-quality relevant education, conducting research, offering skill development. Education is the most powerful instrument for attaining social justice and equality. An 'inclusive and equitable education' is crucial in creating an inclusive and equitable society. 'NEP 2020' affirms bridging social category gaps in access, participation and learning outcomes. Quality higher education opens broad area for upliftment of individual as well society supporting to break out the disadvantage of exclusion.

Research Methodology-

This research is exploratory and relies on qualitative research methods. Data was gathered by reviewing primary and secondary sources.

Prospects-

'Uttarakhand Open University' is a single-mode state open university that offers programs in accordance with UGC -DEB guidelines. High-quality human resources perform specialized counseling sessions, foster trust among stakeholders, and regularly fulfill social duties. University offers opportunities for higher education to various groups, including disadvantaged individuals in remote areas, working professionals, housewives, and adults seeking to enhance their knowledge. They aim to facilitate learning in a dynamic society, provide chances for skill development, and promote innovation and research across all disciplines through a flexible and inclusive higher education system. The admission criteria for the university are flexible. The university consistently aims to deliver high-quality education to students. This aims to enhance learning and excellence in new fields by combining courses, setting eligibility criteria, determining age requirements, conducting examinations, and operating programs. It also seeks to improve the educational system by offering a non-formal educational channel that complements the formal system, encourages credit transfer, and provides education and

training in various fields. Advance national integration and holistic development of the human psyche through its policies and activities. The university focuses on visual perception. University's goal is to enhance higher education in Uttarakhand by promoting knowledge and offering accessible opportunities for quality education to all residents, particularly the youth, those with limited educational access, and employed individuals. This will encourage lifelong learning, skill development, self-employment, and job placement, with a focus on serving the state, nation, and humanity. Source- (URL https://www.uou.ac.in/vision)

The University's mission is to become the top choice for learners looking for flexible, cheap, and high-quality university education.
Source- (URL https://www.uou.ac.in/mission)

Opportunities-
Online programs of study, Employment oriented programs of study, Alliances with national and international institutions, Own OER and MOOCS. Inclusion of blended learning in running programs, Integration of locally relevant programs, Inclusion of regional language certificate and diploma programs are initiatives for strengthening university in present time. University continuously working on keeping in focus these points for modification and advancement of teaching learning process. The university organizing orientation/induction programs, counseling sessions and lecture series in every department. The University offers several channels such as 'IVRS, Online/Offline helpdesk, social media, App based support, Chat-box, e-mail support, interactive radio counseling, enquiry counter, RTI, blogs, and phone calls' to promptly address student queries.
(source-SSR UOU 2023)
Grievance redressal system implemented in the University is strong and it is considered to be a fairly good system of grievance redressal by the learners and the other stakeholders. The learner progression in the University is fairly good and it has also been acknowledged in a report published by the Common Wealth of Learning (COL). The Alumni Association of the University is the first registered alumni association in any Open University. Various courses of the University lay due emphasis on cross-cutting issues. Recently, the University has created two MOOCs, whereas, the OER policy of the University was adopted which can be accessed through the URL: https://www.uou.ac.in/oer-policy.

Challenges-
Uttarakhand Open University is facing various types of challenges such as –
  ➢ Development of Quality study material,
  ➢ Preparation of bilingual study material,
  ➢ Better development of information technology infrastructure,
  ➢ increasing learners' participation
  ➢ establishment of adequate infrastructure,
  ➢ construction of well-equipped class rooms for offline classes,
  ➢ Enrichment of audio/video repository,
  ➢ creation of proper system for providing placement services,
  ➢ enrichment of financial strength and strengthen employee welfare,

> ➢ development of university's own Centre's for conduction of examination.

Teaching learning and evaluation-

The University organizes unique counseling sessions to enhance teaching and learning, in addition to the normal counseling provided by the Learner support Centre's. In these sessions (having the duration of 07 or 10 or 15 days in different locations of the state), the faculty of the University arranges special counseling sessions of mandatory and/or voluntary nature simultaneously. Further, in the programs being offered in the science stream to ensure the practical understanding of the learners', practical oriented workshops are organized. This effort has yielded very positive results, and it is by now the USP of the University's teaching-learning process. The University has established special learner support Centre's for women, prison-inmates, and tribals, to ensure its reach amongst these sections of the society.

The Self learning material is prepared through a standardized and defined process in which in-house faculty and the experts from outside also participate. The learners, who prefer to accept only the digitized Self learning material, are allowed a concession of 15% in program fee. Teaching system in open university is based on self-learning material prepared by university. This is type of classroom teaching in written form.

Course is divided on credits." One Credit equals 30 hours of study, encompassing activities like as reading and comprehending SLM, listening to audio, viewing videos, participating in contact sessions, teleconferencing, and completing assigned tasks." The University operates a Community Radio mostly for educational reasons and to share information with students and other listener groups. During radio broadcasts, listeners can call the station to ask questions, which are answered by the faculty or professionals hosting the show.

The evaluation process of the University ensures utmost sanctity and fairness. Most of the activities are digitized and continuous reforms in automation have led the UOU to carry-out the examination in the minimum time with minimum faults and eventually issue even a transcript and upload the data on the portal of the NAD/Digi locker.
(Source- https://uou.ac.in/uploads/UKUNGN110579.pdf.)

Research, innovation and extension

Research in UOU is being carried on strictly as per the provisions of the Regulations of the UGC. The coursework is of a very high order and the researchers have always appreciated it. The highlights of research, innovations, and extension in UOU incorporates-LMS Platform for course-work, Conduction of regular webinars by experts from different institutions. Innovative contents on Cyber Security and in the oriental language (Sanskrit) developed as MOOCs, Adoption of online courses from NPTEL, edx, Spoken Tutorials (IIT Bombay), and EDI. Publication and Ethics guidelines. Strict Plagiarism check. Consultancy policy duly approved by the EC of the University. Separate innovation cell. Only internal faculty is allowed to be the main supervisor for the researchers, good number of quality research publications in academic disciplines and in the system of distance education by the academic faculty, Extension activities carried out in the entire domain area and even at Raj Bhawan of the state.

Infrastructure and learning resources-

The University's Information and communication technology proficiency is crucial for the smooth execution of all its activities. The IT infrastructure at headquarter, Regional Centre's and Learner support Centre's are fairly good and the competence of ICT staff ensures the best use of available infrastructure. The software is properly licensed, and the University has an internet bandwidth of 100mbps. Updating ICT infrastructure is an ongoing effort, particularly focusing on the in-house produced applications and software. MOUs for AMC are established to ensure continuous availability of ICT enabled services in the University.

The University has more than 10 specific facilities for media production, Transmission facilities are available through the Community Radio also. The University has its duly approved OER policy. The University has duly approved IT policy. The University has duly approved ERP document. Partial automation of Library on e-granthalaya exists. Due training in Library Automation provided to concerned personnel. 8) Student Information System (SIS/ in-house developed program of the University). University App. Social Media channels (YouTube/ Facebook), Kiosk, Blogs of the Departments, Web-based Community Radio, etc.

Governance leadership and management

The University's governance is strictly as per the provisions contained in its Act, Statutes and Ordinances. Further, the directions of the UGC, UGC-DEB, other Regulatory Authorities and the State Govt. are also followed in its governance. It is fairly transparent and it ensures the representation of various stake-holders in the governing bodies. The University's Vision, Mission, and Thrust Areas were developed using a systematic approach and have been officially accepted by the University's Executive Committee. The University's objectives are specified in Schedule-2 of the Uttaranchal Open University Act ,2005, and they are strictly followed. The University has consistently adhered to its geographical authority and complied with the established norms, rules, and regulations to prevent any confusion or legal disputes. e-Governance is increasingly applied in all the functional areas like planning and development, administration, finance and accounts, learners' admission, dispatch of SLM, learner-support, grievance redressal, and examination. Professional development of teachers, academic consultants and employees is a priority area for the University, as most of the eligible teachers have completed their orientations and refresher programs.

Several faculty members have participated in Faculty Development Programs (FDPs), summer or winter schools, and other training programs. Specific training courses were arranged for the personnel and more employees were assigned to participate in professional training programs on GEM, e-tendering, and e-Granthalaya.

Since, its proper functioning from 2011, the UOU has continuously evolved the sets of values in different areas and over the period of time some of the practices could be developed into the best practices of the University, e.g., ICT practices and e-governance were employed in the University in a big way and gradually every teaching faculty of the University could attain a good level of proficiency in ICT practices which helped the creation of SILM, video contents,

and online counseling. The University has been very careful in paying due attention to the areas related to institutional values.

Findings- This study found that Uttarakhand Open University is continuously working on providing quality higher education to underprivileged groups of society. Due to effect of extension activities and publicity through media and public relation using both print and electronic media the access towards quality higher education increased for persons living in periphery of society. University always promotes activities which supports sensitization and awareness towards relevant quality higher education in society. Increasing women enrolment and rise in admission of scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, other backward class, including transgenders and economic weaker section of society shows that Uttarakhand Open University is consistently working towards dissemination of higher education in marginalized section of society. Intensity of awareness programs should be high to develop feeling of connectedness between university and learners.

CONCLUSION

Unequal access to opportunities for growing humans can lead to disparities in society . Thus, it is essential to promote accelerated development of higher education among the underprivileged population to ensure equity and inclusion in higher education in India . Uttarakhand Open University is providing opportunities for a high-quality education that offers equal access to all learners, irrespective of their social and economic status. Higher education plays a critical role in the sustainable development of society.The Open and Distance education system can help to accelerate the growth of higher education among disadvantaged populations. In the evolving higher education landscape the Open and Distance education system is becoming is the preferred choice for individuals seeking higher education who have missed out on possibilities owing to limited finances or the unavailability of traditional higher education methods.and aware towards recent system of teaching and learning . As In 2015, India committed to achieving 'target 4' of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (SDG4), which focuses on ensuring equitable and high-quality education for all and promoting continuous learning opportunities for all individuals.For better society and upliftment of individuals Open and distance learning system paves significant role .

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