

COVER PAGE

Research Paper Title: Exploring new pathways to increase learner's engagement with special reference to e-Mentoring in the field of ODL : Experiences from KKHSOU, Assam

Theme of the Paper: Utilizing educational technologies for ODL

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby would like to explicitly state that the research article titled “**Exploring new pathways to increase learner’s engagement with special reference to E-Mentoring in the field of ODL : Experiences from KKHSOU, Assam**” is original and has not been published earlier, or that it is not under consideration for possible publication elsewhere.

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Exploring New Pathways to Increase Learner's Engagement with Special Reference to e-Mentoring in the Field of ODL: Experiences from KKHSOU, Assam

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Abstract

Worldwide, the education systems today are in a position to take up the challenge of the new information and communication technologies. If we look at the present educational environment, we shall witness a mass advent of digital solutions, which have changed the way information is disseminated to the masses. Open and Distance Learning has benefitted a lot from the different ICT tools because it led to the establishment of a more collaborative learning system. However, a few challenges persist which are reducing the student dropout rates, increasing student retention, training the students on use of new tools,

etc. Therefore, a lot of emphasis is given on collaboration, both between teachers and learners and between education partners. Introducing new ways to engage the learners within the ODL system has been kind of a challenge considering the fact that most of the learners tend to feel isolated at some point of time and then eventually dropout. Fortunately, the continuous advancement of IT support systems are merging student's virtual learning environments with the administrative support services, to the benefit of both.

Keywords: open and distance learning, e-Mentoring, information and communication technology, dropout, retention

INTRODUCTION

We are all aware of the role played by education in every sphere of our life. Benjamin Franklin, a noted American polymath, had once said, 'An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.' It goes without saying that education is one of the building blocks of a strong society. However, not many are fortunate enough to reap the benefits of higher and professional education due to certain constraints. More so, it becomes difficult to provide quality education at this level due to fund crunch, shortage of human resources, poor accessibility to online learning, etc. Open and Distance Learning has emerged as an answer to this challenge. Open and Distance Learning institutes and other open universities all over the world have been constantly providing quality education in order to prepare the learners to help them face the challenges of tomorrow. Over the years, one of the burning problems of open and distance education has been student

dropout rate, which can be attributed to a number of factors such as geographical distance, inadequate contact with the instructors, inability to understand the online tools through which learning is provided, and so on. Therefore, providing learner specific support services along with building a mechanism for learner's engagement is the need of the hour. ICT tools and other technologies not only help reduce the student dropout rates to a large extent but also help build a sense of trust and belongingness as far as the learners are concerned. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, the first and the only open university of India's North East, has been taken as a case study by this researcher to explore different pathways to learner's engagement by specifically focusing on e-Mentoring.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the present study are:

- To assess the ways on developing a better learner engagement system as far as ODL is concerned
- To analyse ways and means on how to reduce student dropout rates and increase student retention
- To address the pros and cons of e-Mentoring in the field of ODL

METHODOLOGY

The present study is basically a qualitative analysis on the importance of exploring new pathways for engaging the learners in the field of open and distance learning. Document analysis of a few secondary sources (journals, books, magazines, etc.) was done in order to substantiate the importance of incorporating a blended learning environment into the folds of ODL. The researcher's own observation was considered while analyzing the

different ways in which learners can be engaged in the learning process and thereby lowering the student dropout rates.

THE PROBLEM OF STUDENT DROPOUT RATES

Student dropout rate is one of the common problems that can be seen in both the conventional and distance educational systems. This problem is more prominent in the field of open and distance learning. The main reason of this problem is that, unlike in traditional universities, the learners in open and distance learning institutions are not in constant touch with the teachers/instructors. As a result, they become demotivated and on certain occasions drop out of the academic programme. From the point of view of efficiency, dropout is a concern in at least two dimensions. One, at the aggregate economy level, education is known to be an important determinant of economic growth and high premature student dropout rate

means loss of potential productivity. And two, within the education sector, student dropout rate raises the cost of achieving a targeted proportion of the population having some level of schooling. The other area where student dropout rate is a problem—and perhaps the more important one—is from the equity perspective. Now, let us look into the problem of dropout with reference to Tinto’s model of Student Integration (1975).

Tinto has said that student dropout rate is the sum total of a variety of factors taken together. When a learner enrolls into any academic programme, he or she definitely comes with a certain set of preconceived notions in his or her mind. Most importantly, a learner enrolls to obtain a degree, get good grades, interact with peers, and enhance knowledge. In the process of accomplishing his goals and commitments, if he feels left out or alone, then the motivation to further continue with his studies declines and he tends to drop out.

This very fact is evident from the Tinto’s model which is given below:

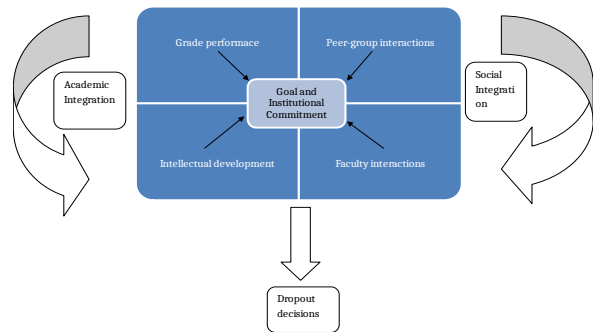


Fig 1: Adapted by Stephen W. Draper from Tinto’s Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research which was published in the Review of Educational Research, Vol. 45 (pp. 89-125)

Thereby, it becomes pertinent to keep in touch with the learners at various stages of the learning process and reassure them of providing help (academic and administrative) during the course of their study at the respective institution.

THEORETICAL BACKDROP OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Learning when disseminated through proper ICT based platforms makes

learning interactive and interesting. In fact, it helps a learner to better absorb the content; a fact which has been backed by Siemen's (2005) *theory of Connectivism*. Technology has indeed helped people to share information and contribute to new avenues of learning. *The Engagement theory* espouses this very fact which says that students must be engaged in learning activities by way of interacting with others. Knowledge when shared among each other leads to better understanding of concepts and other issues as has been propagated by *social constructivism theory* which is a sociological theory of knowledge. Thus, having a Social Constructivist Learning Environment in an online setting provides a platform for the learners to actively construct their own understanding through interaction with their peers. This theory also says that the instructors should come up with a well-designed learning activity that can bring out the best in the students. When

learning takes place through online mode, it stimulates the minds of the learners.

BUILDING A SOLID LEARNER ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON E-MENTORING: EXPERIENCES FROM KKHSOU

In the light of the above discussions, we can say that student retention has occupied the top-most priority in most of the educational institutions, more specifically distance learning institutions and open universities. Even though instructors provide the basic support to the learners, what is needed is a strong smart learning environment which makes it possible to interact and keep in touch with the learners virtually. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) has been striving to provide such online platforms with the help of which the learners can keep in touch with the instructors or the mentors and keep themselves updated about various academic and administrative related news.

Established under the provision of the 'Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University Act, 2005' enacted by the State Legislature of Assam, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University has always prided itself on mentoring the learners through different platforms while living up to its motto of 'Education Beyond Barriers.' Even though certain support services such as library facilities, counselling classes, radio phone-in programmes, laboratory facilities, etc. are provided to the learners, these are not sufficient enough to keep the learners continue with their education and dissuade them from dropping out of the respective programme. That is why a proper technological framework must be in place so as to keep the learners engrossed in their studies and encourage them to carry on their commitments without fail. In other words, it would not be wrong to say that a blended approach is the key to attain balance in the teaching-learning process where face-to-face interaction can be combined with e-

learning technologies. Some of the commonly used tools and platforms are:

- a) Learning through community radio station (Jnan Taranga): The community radio station of the University, known as Jnan Taranga, broadcasts a number of programmes pertaining to the areas of health and hygiene, social evils, environmental issues, women empowerment, sports related issues, etc. Even though the aerial distance of the radio station is about 15 km, yet the different programmes have been well appreciated and liked by its listeners residing in and around the 15 km radius. It is worth mentioning here that Jnan Taranag had started live streaming its various programmes from 2021 onwards. One can get access to the different programmes at <https://i-radiolive.com/live/channel/Jnantaranga>

which is accessible across all devices and platforms.

- b)** Services provided by the Digital Library: The Central Library of the University maintains links to various e-resources such as Journals, Dictionaries, Thesauruses, Encyclopaedias and e-books. One can access the different online journals at JSTOR and JGATE databases. The Central Library of KKHSOU had recently launched the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPCA) for the users in March 2021. The OPAC of KKHSOU Central Library was designed using an Open Source Software named 'Koha.' The main advantage of OPAC is that users can search and view the available documents online.
- c)** Learning Management System: A learning management system (LMS) by the name of **eBidya** has

been designed so as to upload the study materials of various programmes for the learners. This is because if a learner misses any online or offline classes, then he or she can just log in to the respective site and access the materials (E-SLM, audio media, audio-visual media). The contents of the Learning Management Systems are delivered in four quadrants: e-tutorial, e-content, discussion forum and self-assessment.

- d)** Delivering information through social media platforms: Learners can keep a tab on the activities of the University by following the home pages on Facebook and Twitter. Such activities also include details about the examination schedule, examination results, information about the functioning of the University, old question papers, etc. Learners can also post comments or

any queries the various pages of the University.

- e)** Providing e-Mentoring to learners through online platforms: In order for the learners to not feel isolated, different departments of the University formed mentoring groups, specifically in WhatsApp and Telegram. The main objective of forming such mentoring groups was to provide the much needed guidance to the learners as far as their academic learning is concerned. Presently such groups exist for the Bachelors Degree, Masters Degree, Diploma and Post Graduate Diploma Programmes. The mentors also discuss about the online class schedules, examination related matters, admission related issues and so on.
- f)** Provision of online classes: Online classes (mostly through Google Meet) are regularly conducted by

the faculty members belonging to different disciplines.

- g)** Provision of online study material: The University has made arrangements for the availability of E-SLM (soft copies of the self-learning materials). The most important advantage of E-SLMs is that one can access it irrespective of time and place.
- h)** Availability of online audio and video lectures through University's YouTube channel: A number of audio-visual pre-recorded programmes are uploaded in the YouTube channel of the University for the benefit of the learners. These are some supplementary learning tools which help the learners to understand the different concepts in a better way.
- i)** Dissemination of information through Android App: The University has come up with an

Android App that a learner can browse for any information related to the academic or administrative matters. However, this app can only be used on Android Devices (2.3.6 and above version).

One of the ways in which the University has made efforts to reach out to the learners is through mentoring groups. Usually there are different mentoring models that are used extensively by most of the organisations such as Dyads, e-Mentoring, Group mentoring, Multiple mentoring, Peer mentoring, Reverse mentoring, Team mentoring and Triad mentoring.

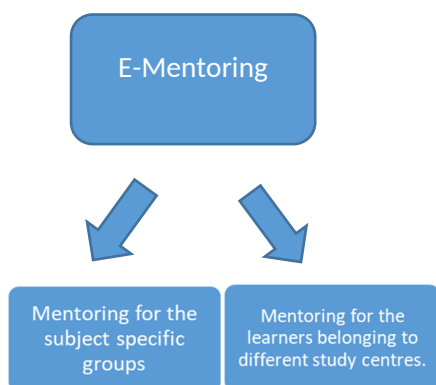
KKHSOU has made mentoring a priority keeping in mind the needs and preferences of the learners. E-Mentoring is widely used along with Group and Multiple mentoring. Apart from having separate mentoring groups for the learners belonging to different programmes and semesters, there are also different mentoring groups (in both social media platforms) for learners

belonging to various study centres situated in different parts of the State of Assam. In the groups belonging to different disciplines, there are more than one mentors whereas in the groups which consist of only the learners from different study centres, there is only one single mentor. Usually, under distance education, learning is provided through various study centres under state government recognised colleges. However, due to certain constraints, very often the learners are not able to attend face-to-face counselling classes. Therefore, mentoring is provided to the learners irrespective of the study centre he or she belongs to.

For instance, in case of Mass Communication, there are programme-specific groups – for Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Mass Communication, Diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication, Post Graduate Diploma in Mass Communication and for Post Graduate Diploma in Broadcast Journalism.

Accordingly, groups are created in WhatsApp consisting of the learners belonging to different programmes semester-wise. The faculty members of the discipline acts as the admins of the respective groups (in WhatsApp and Telegram) and keeps the learners posted of any updates from the University, be it in the field of examination, question papers, course curriculum, scheduling of online classes, etc.

This is shown in the following diagram:



It is not that only the queries of the learners are answered in the respective mentoring groups. Rather, the mentors guide the learners on how to analyse the

learning materials and make use of different audio-video tools. This helps create a bond between the mentor and the mentee. Such engagement proves to be rather fruitful in the long run as the learner feels encouraged to pursue their respective programmes leading to low student dropout rates.

In a way, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University have time and again laid emphasis on blended learning where it makes use of both the conventional self-learning materials and the online learning tools for dissemination of information to the learners. Even though the present pandemic situation has disrupted the smooth conduct of the face-to-face counselling classes at the respective study centres, the University has been conducting such classes through online mode.

With every passing day, new technologies and tools have been incorporated into the teaching-learning environment by different educational institutions. This is done so as to widen the

learner's network, build a networked community and most importantly provide an interactive environment for both the learners and the instructors to interact and deliberate on a variety of issues. Ubiquitous Learning Environment (ULE) is not something that is of recent origin, but it is less utilised in the field of open and distance learning. This is because to develop such an environment one needs to have a robust infrastructure in place as Web Pads, PDAs, Smart Phones and Tablets are widely used along with technologies such as Cloud Computing, Artificial Intelligence, GPS, GIS and Sensors. Even though such a learning environment is yet to be implemented in K. K. Handiqui State Open University, the University makes use of a unique blended learning environment where online learning platforms are combined with offline learning resources.

RESULTANT ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

It goes without saying that technology can aid in strengthening the ties between a learner and the organisation and between a learner and an instructor. This helps the learner to feel motivated to continue with their studies and not feel demoralised to discontinue. Incorporation of technology into the teaching-learning framework also helps in providing collaborative learning, leads to development of cognitive skills and attitude, increases productivity and performance, and most importantly provides motivation (Based on John Keller's ARCS model of Motivational Design). An educational institution must make efforts to render various support services to the learners, especially to those who are pursuing their studies in distance mode. Unlike the Western countries, the utilisation of such IT based technologies and tools are still in a nascent stage in India.

Nevertheless, the changes we have seen in the past few decades have been immense. The transition from postal correspondence model to an Intelligent Flexible Learning Model is immense. It has not only benefitted the learners but also the instructors as well as the organisation itself. The right form of technology for any educational institution depends on the right amount of resources that are available (capital, human resources, infrastructure, etc.). What might be suitable for someone living in an urban area may not be feasible for someone residing in a rural area. Therefore, one must look into the pros and cons before incorporating any learning system into the academic fold.

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